Indelible Conventions

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Indelible Conventions

by PixelPancakes

Summary

Through a System mistake, Shen Qingqiu is returned to his previous body which, as it turns out, isn't as dead as the System insisted it was.

Luo Binghe just wants to have his happy ending with his husband. Instead, he finds himself in an unfamiliar land where he and his husband are nothing more than fiction, searching through a sea of people pretending to be Shen Qingqiu.

At least he has Yuan to guide him to his husband.

> “So, who’re you looking for?”
> “Shen Qingqiu.”
> Yuan nods sagely. “Ahhh, a roleplayer. That explains… well, everything,” he says, as if the word ‘roleplayer’ perfectly justifies what Binghe knows is abnormal behavior for this world. He quickly commits the word to memory. Just in case.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The notice comes one day without fanfare. No accompanying sounds, no loud notifications, no bright lights. And, as most terrible warnings are wont to do, it doesn't need anything more to bring Shen Qingqiu — Shen *Yuan* — shaking, to his knees.

[Achievement Unlocked: All Roads Led to Rome! Host has completed the epilogue for 'Proud Immortal Demon Way.' Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Host will be transported back to their previous world in one days' time and given the chance to continue their life where they left off. This System thanks you for your hard work and wishes you luck!]

[Time remaining until transmigration: 23:59:46]

~*~

Shen Qingqiu tells no one the truth, thinking it might help to try to forget, hoping that nothing will remind him, knowing that the System can't be fought or bartered with. He's going to leave regardless — the best he can do is live in blissful ignorance for the length of time he has remaining.

In the end, it still feels like watching the hours counting down to his execution.

He says his goodbyes in passive ways, making time to meet with everyone he can if only for a minute or two. For Liu Qingge, he offers to spar. For Ning Yingying, he gifts a fan he's seen her not-so-discreetly eyeing. For Yue Qingyuan, he brings tea and conversation.

Each interaction ends with a final, earnest "thank you."

If any of them think his words are unusual, they make no comments, wishing him well with differing forms of 'no, thank *you* ' tacked on before their goodbyes. Shen Qingqiu doesn't know if he should be grateful or dismayed that they haven't noticed.

All he knows is that if he has to leave, he was always meant to do it quietly.

[Time remaining until transmigration: 03:23:31]

~*~

The three final hours are spent with his husband, with his Binghe. With every smile from Binghe, he feels compelled to confess the truth. He tries. Gods, he tries. But everytime the words meet his lips, they turn to ash on his tongue.

Part of him blames it on the System. (He's still banned from telling the truth, even at the end.)

Part of him blames it on himself. (He doesn't want his last memory of his husband to be marked with heartbreak. He's always been a bit too selfish for his own good.)

(Both parts of him are right.)

They make dinner together as the clock reads [02:03:28], if Shen Qingqiu sitting at a table and watching Binghe can be called making dinner 'together.' They say little; all they've ever needed was each other's company, and today is no different. The normalcy of it all lets Shen Qingqiu pretend the timer looming over his head isn't there.

Binghe never notices the loose threads sticking out from where Shen Qingqiu begins to unravel as he watches the clock tick down. Shen Qingqiu has always been good at pretending to be alright and this is his final performance; it's bound to be his best. He's had years of practice, after all.

[Time remaining until transmigration: 00:06:23]

Shen Qingqiu traces shapes in his husband's chest, head resting in the crook of Luo Binghe's shoulder, listening to the beat of a steady heart. It's safe where he rests, covered in cool bed sheets and pressed against a warm, comforting soul.

Here, in the arms of his beloved, he finds his words.

"If this one leaves," Shen Qingqiu whispers into Binghe's side, "know that it is not Binghe's fault. It is this one's own failings that tear him from Binghe."

Binghe runs his fingers absently through the wispy strands framing Shen Qingqiu's face, breathing slowly. The heat of it brushes Shen Qingqiu's cheek, coming and going in ways that can only belong to sleep.

He presses one last kiss to his sleeping husband's forehead.

When Luo Binghe wakes, the space in the bed beside him is cold to the touch.

~*~

[U02 removed from role, 'Host.' 'Host' role reassigned to character 'Luo Binghe,' Protagonist of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* . Mission 'Anything for Binghe' available for completion.]

[Accept?]

[Yes] [No]

Luo Binghe stares down at the translucent blue rectangle, squinting at the white characters inscribed across its surface. He waves his hand through it, sending ripples that do little but distort the words.

A year of searching and this nonsensical plaque is the only clue he has of his husband's whereabouts.

And Luo Binghe didn't find it — it found *him.*

He passes his fingers through it again, feeling nothing but air. This time it moves from its flattened place near his waist, flying up and into his face as if his touch disturbed it into action. He scrambles back, hand searching for a sword. With a swift movement, he cleaves the rectangle in two. It turns red, upset, distorting with a high-pitched scream before falling back into a calming shade of blue.

Beside it, a second rectangle appears.

[Host shouldn't treat their System like this. This System is just trying to assist. (╥﹏╥)]

"What are you?"

[This System is this System.]

Luo Binghe sheaths his sword, sneering down at the mocking words. "Who is U02?"

[U02 is the designation for the previous Host, 'Shen Qingqiu, né [illegible],' where 'U' stands for 'User.' This Host is designated U03. Some information regarding U02 will be withheld due to privacy conditions.]

The sneer becomes a growl. "What have you done with my husband?"

[This System miscalculated the Affection points raised by U02 and accidentally sent U02 to their previous location of residence. Hopefully the difficulties faced by Luo Binghe be amended by helping find U02. This System can't locate U02 itself, but can offer suitable guidance in the meantime. Without assistance, Host won't be able to access U02.]

Luo Binghe blinks at this glowing rectangle, this… 'System.' A wrenching feeling settles in his core. A year with nothing — *nothing* — and then this. It's an opportunity that's far too good to be true, but…

Luo Binghe has nothing else.

"You can help me find Shizun?" he says at last. He hears the hope in his words, hauntingly bitter in tone.

[This System will do its best (✿◠‿◠)], the small rectangle reads, disappearing as soon as the words appear and revealing the original rectangle beneath.

[Mission 'Anything for Binghe' available for completion.]

[Accept?]

[Yes] [Yes]

"I accept."

If his voice shakes as he speaks, well—

That's between him and the System.

~*~

The moment Luo Binghe steps into the darkness of a new world, a chime rings in time with the appearance of a new levitating rectangle.

[This System welcomes Host to the World: 'Earth – Modern.' Achievement received: 'One Small Step.' +100 L-Points awarded. Current mission progress: 10%.]

"L…Points?" Binghe sounds out slowly.

[L-Points are learning points. Various points will be rewarded as Host's mission progresses. Normally this System would deduct points for not following certain rules, but Host has been through so much and deserves his happy end!]

Luo Binghe glares down at the System. It seems to understand that it misinterpreted his true question, quickly adding,

[Points are currency that can be spent later on for various benefits, including a special reward for completing this mission!]

Luo Binghe, distrusting any ‘benefits’ the System offers, instantly resolves to never spend a single point unless absolutely necessary.

Every muscle in his body tenses as the sound of human voices resounds around him, bouncing off the dark walls at his sides. He follows its origin, squinting against the sunlight and into a busy street. The portal provided by the System had set him in an alley, though the towering walls around him are far from reminiscent of any other alley he’s been in.

A sun-warmed breeze ruffles his hair as another noisy group of people pass, fighting off the chill of the dark. He shivers.

“What sort of place is this?”

[Host is currently in a city in the country of America. This city’s population is approx. 600 thousand.]

Binghe pales, heart tightening. He collapses against one of the alley walls, his forearm the only thing keeping him on his feet. “Six-hundred… thousand?”

The little blue rectangle shifts in the air, making itself visible even from his new position.

[Host doesn’t need to worry! We will find Host’s husband. Information about U02’s whereabouts can be provided as Host gains more understanding of their surroundings. Host can also rest assured that his husband is within this city, even though U02’s location is currently unavailable! .+:｡(≧∇≦)ﾉﾟ.+:｡]

As uninspiring as the System is, its words help Binghe collect himself. He rises from the wall, taking a tentative step into the sunlight. As his eyes adjust, he blinks, taking in the city stretching out before him.

Metal boxes filled with people and spewing noxious gasses pass by at dangerous speeds. Glass walls tower above him, reflecting every glinting light that passes by. The people are barely dressed — most are in light, shortened clothing that never comes past their joints, some shaped closer to the contours of their bodies, others loose enough that they appear to lack any shape at all.

Luo Binghe feels entirely out of place in his dark robes and, with a start, he finds himself reaching up to his forehead, suddenly realizing he hasn’t bothered to hide his demon mark at all. He receives a couple of odd looks, the motion catching a few people’s attention, but nothing comes of it beyond that.

It’s only then that he notices the complete lack of spiritual energy normally present around him.

The sensation, now that he’s very aware of it, is jarring. To be unable to feel the presence of the qi normally found in other people means that Luo Binghe can’t sense them — anyone

here could easily sneak up on him and he'd never know.

He jumps as a finger taps on his shoulder, nearly startling himself into one of the odd metal sculptures embedded into the ground.

He's met with the expectant gaze of a young woman with black hair, a glowing metal rectangle not dissimilar to the System's rectangle clutched in her hands.

"Oh my gosh. *Oh my gosh* . You *are* cosplaying him. Can I get a photo with you? If not that's fine, but my brother's been obsessed with PIDW forever and your cosplay is just so impressive that he needs to see it. He'll be so jealous," she rambles, half of the words entirely lost on Binghe. Cosplay? PIDW? *Photo* ? What—?

"Th—Yes?" The words come before he can reflect on them.

Her eyes light up. "Thank you so much! Thank you! Thank you!"

Before Binghe can react, she has her arm pressed against his shoulder, the glowing rectangle shining down on them from above. In it, he sees himself and the girl. She presses down on a white circle a couple of times, leaving him confused before she unravels herself from his side.

"Thank you so, so much. I really appreciate it. You're here for the con down the street, right?"

"I—" He must look as confused as he feels, if the girl's falling expression is any indicator.

"Sorry, didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. If you're not here for the con, are you here for a photoshoot or something?" She gasps. "Do you have an Instagram or Tumblr I can send to my brother? He'd totally give it a follow."

Instagram? Tumblr? *Photoshoot?*

Is she even speaking the same language?

[This System has provided Host with the Skill: 'Translation,' so that Host can understand others. This skill only works for the following languages: English, Mandarin. All unknown words are the result of cultural differences.]

The System can hear his thoughts. Wonderful.

[This System would like Binghe to know that he is just like his husband.]

"This one doesn't have any of those things. I'm here looking for someone."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry. If I'd known you were busy, I'd never have asked you for anything. Maybe I can help you find who you're looking for?"

"Do you know Shen Qingqiu?"

The girl sighs, mouthing a word Binghe doesn't recognize before addressing him. "The only Shen Qingqiu I've seen was at the con. Sorry, but that's all I've got."

[Host has received invaluable information. This System can now provide a map of U02's general location. For a more exact location, more information must be found.]

A blue rectangle with what Binghe hazards is a map appears between him and the girl.

"This… 'con.' Where is it?"

"Just down the street and to the left. There will be a whole bunch of cosplayers out front — you can't miss it.

Luo Binghe starts in the direction the girl points, only to pause as he remembers his manners. He can almost hear his shizun's chastising voice.

"This one thanks you for your help." He bows.

"No prob. Hope you find Shen Qingqiu!" She looks him up and down, an odd glint in her eyes. "And if you see my brother, tell him I called dibs."

With an affirming nod, Binghe takes off down the street.

It's when he's half-way to the con when he realizes he doesn't have the girl's (much less her brother's) name.

Ah. Oh well.

~*~

Luo Binghe quickly learns that 'cosplayer' refers to someone in costume when he encounters a crowd of people dressed in unusually shaped, gaudy clothing and excessive, oddly colored makeup.

If he wasn't so focused on finding his husband, the thought that he was identified as one of these individuals would disturb him.

Briefly — very briefly — he attempts to enter the building, only to be turned away upon explaining that no, he doesn't have a 'day pass'. The only thing that keeps him from demanding entry is a message from the System that states that he will be detained for causing trouble and thus would never be able to reunite with his shizun.

The System, useless as it is, manages to fail as soon as he is forced onto the streets, leaving him to deal with this new world entirely on his own with only the knowledge that his husband can be found inside a building he can't enter.

(Binghe tries not to recall the fear that had washed over him at the sight of the warping red rectangle—

[ERROR. System can't—can't— *ERROR* . Performing System Debug. Time until System is online: ERROR // < Variable = 'TimeRemainder' > Unavailable. System restarting in: 00:02]

[00:01]

[00:00]

[System Restarting]

"System? …System?"

—It doesn't work.)

Which brings him to his current state, sitting with tears in his eyes at the edge of an unkempt stone flower bed. Frustration tightens his features and he wipes at his face, smearing salty tears across his cheeks.

He wants to be back at the bamboo hut, cooking for his beloved. He wants his husband sitting across from him, surreptitiously hiding a smile behind his fan as Binghe tries to make him laugh. He wants to be anywhere but here — so long as Shizun is by his side.

He sniffles, burying his face in his hands.

"Are you alright?'

Binghe looks up, meeting a concerned gaze shielded by glasses. A young man, no older than thirty stands before him, left hand resting on a cane.

"Can I help?"

The Binghe of a year ago would have told him to mind his own business. The Binghe of today, crying in front of a stranger, is far too tired of being alone to be callous.

He does his best to dry his tears.

"This one doesn't think so. I lost…someone. I can't find them anywhere and I don't have one of those 'day pass' things with me."

"Oh. Um." The young man rubs the back of his neck. "If you give me a name, I'll look for them with you. My sister left her pass with me, so I can let you borrow hers."

Binghe's mouth widens before he can calm himself, his teeth clinking as he forces it closed. He stands and bows.

“This one is Luo Binghe.”

The young man looks him up and down, the movement eerily reminiscent of the girl from earlier. “I gathered. I’m Yuan,” he says with a bright laugh, the sound bringing a flutter to Binghe’s chest. He curses himself for letting this stranger incite such feelings within him.

Yuan holds out a hand. Binghe gapes at it.

Yuan pulls it away.

“So, who’re you looking for?”

“Shen Qingqiu.”

Yuan nods sagely. “Ahhh, a roleplayer. That explains… well, everything,” he says, as if the word ‘roleplayer’ perfectly justifies what Binghe knows is abnormal behavior for this world. He quickly commits the word to memory. Just in case.

A yellow rope settles around his neck, startling him back to the person before him.

“That’s just the day pass, don’t freak out so much. Probably should have asked before putting it on you, but hindsight’s twenty-twenty, you know? Alright, let’s go.”

“What—?”

Yuan raises a brow. “I said I’d help, didn’t I? This is me, helping.”

Binghe stares blankly.

“Do you want to find Shen Qingqiu or not?”

The Heavenly Demon is on his feet before Yuan finishes. Yuan sighs, an exasperated look crossing his face, one which disappears with the chime that rings from his pocket. Again, Binghe recognizes the item as a bright box. Yuan’s fingers trace the surface, stopping at the sight of something on it — whatever he sees brings out a loose laugh.

He turns the bright side to face Binghe.

“My sister sent me a photo of a cosplayer she met. I’m guessing this is you?”

“Ah, yes.”

“‘I asked him to give you a message. Treat him nicely if you meet him. Remember to eat and rest, dumbass. Heart emoji,’” Yuan reads from the box, glancing up every so often, gauging Binghe’s reaction.

“This one remembers her message. She said she ‘called dibs’,” Binghe dutifully recites, stumbling on the word ‘dibs’. “What are ‘dibs’?”

With every mention of the word, Yuan reddens. “Ignore that part. She’s just teasing me.”

“She also mentioned that you were obsessed with something called PIDW? What is that?”

“You don’t know what PIDW is? Aren’t you—right, roleplay. It’s an online novel with a shitty plot centering around the character, Luo Binghe. Which is, of course, you. PIDW stands for the title, *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* ”

Protagonist of Proud Immortal Demon Way. Now he knows where that phrase came from.

Binghe pushes away the implications of Yuan’s statements. His existential crisis can be dealt with later.

~*~

Or maybe it can’t.

It’s difficult for Binghe to ignore the idea that this world thinks he’s a fictional character when there are multiple stalls of merchandise decorated with his image. It’s even more difficult when the people managing those stalls are under the impression that his husband is abusive, villainous scum.

To make matters worse, if the story of PIDW is as Yuan described, that description of Shen Qingqiu is perfectly apt — even if he’s a far cry from Binghe’s own shizun.

Worse still is that, under the same circumstances, Binghe isn’t so sure that he wouldn’t follow the exact same path as the novel’s Luo Binghe.

If his shizun wasn’t his *shizun, who would he be now?*

In the midst of his crisis, a steady hand pulls him from the convention crowds.

“Are you going to be okay?”

Luo Binghe looks down at Yuan. The young man barely comes up to Binghe’s chest, slightly hunched by his dependence on the cane at his side. “Large crowds are difficult for this one.”

“Mm. And you haven’t seen your Shen Qingqiu anywhere?”

Your Shen Qingqiu . Binghe likes the way Yuan says it, like Shen Qingqiu is Binghe’s and Binghe’s alone.

“No.”

“And you won’t give me your real name?”

“This one’s name is Luo Binghe.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

Yuan taps the cane a couple times against the floor in contemplation. “Maybe we can explore the con a bit. The problem could be that you’re looking for him. Sometimes it’s better to let the things you’re searching for come to you.” His lips curl up in a smug smile. “Damn, I’m so *wise* . Maybe I should give up my day job just to give advice.”

Binghe hesitates, slightly unwilling to admit that this arrogant man is right. “That… exploring a bit might be a good idea.”

“Yes!” Yuan punches the air, taking a step towards their next destination. Caught in the motion of the punch, the end of his cane snags on the carpet. “Oh shit,” he manages to eke out as he topples forward, the cane falling from his hands.

In one swift motion, Binghe catches him, left arm sweeping around Yuan’s waist.

Realizing what he’s done, Binghe freezes.

“Good catch.” Yuan pats the arm around him, perfectly oblivious. “Wow, you’re strong. Buff cosplayer, I like that. So, ever been to a con before?”

If Binghe wasn't entirely certain it wasn't on purpose, he would assume that Yuan is flirting with him. Let it be known that he’s spent far too long in the company of Shen Qingqiu to not recognize when someone can’t tell that they’re flirting. Or doing anything romantic, really. As much as Binghe loves his husband, Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t know he was loved even if it hit him in the face with his own fan.

“I have not,” he returns honestly.

“Cool! That means we can just wander around and talk a bit. Maybe check out a few stands. And, of course, keep an eye out for your Shen Qingqiu.”

Steadying himself on Binghe’s arm, Yuan reaches down for his cane.

When it’s in his hands, Yuan shoots Binghe a brilliant grin.

“First stop, my favorite artist. They do a ton of merch for a lot of different media, including manga and manhua. Bet you’ll like their stuff.”

“Is this what you do at a ‘con’? Purchase art?”

“I mean I guess? That’s kinda just part of it. There’s also a lot of events, like panels where you can talk to famous people.”

“You come to these ‘cons’ a lot, then?”

Yuan’s expression turns wistful. “Not until recently. I was in a coma for a bit a while back and when I woke up, I was sorta dead to the world. Time had passed without me, everyone having lived their lives, and I was right where I’d started. Meimei got fed up with me wallowing and ended up dragging me to a con. Not to be dramatic or anything, but it changed my life.”

Yuan chuckles.“God, I hate her,” he adds, his warm eyes betraying his affection. “She insists that she saved my life and, not that I’d ever tell her, she’s right.”

“Your sister sounds like a wonderful person.”

“She is, she is. But enough about me, I want to hear about you.”

“You know my story. It’s written in your PIDW novel. You said so yourself.”

“First off, knowing someone isn’t knowing about their past. Yeah, that’s part of it, but I want to know about what you like, what you like doing, that kind of thing. Second off, I don’t think you’re much like PIDW’s Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe really hated Shen Qingqiu, you know? He was cold, broody, and violent. You kind of remind me more of—” Yuan falters, looking fairly cross with himself. “Nevermind. I really shouldn’t say.”

Luo Binghe pouts, not asking for him to elaborate. “Shizun was — *is* — good to me. Why would I hate him?”

“Fair, fair.”

“... We will find him, won’t we?” Binghe says softly, his eyes starting to water.

Yuan offers him a reassuring smile. “We will. Promise.”

A sob breaks through Luo Binghe as he tries to stop his tears. “This one apologizes. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You really are an adult White Lotus Binghe,” Yuan laughs.

Binghe knits his brows, the phrase familiar. He vaguely recalls Shen Qingqiu saying something similar, only to smile and dismiss it when Binghe asked what it implied. “I don’t understand what that means,” he says with a sniffle.

With a flick of his wrist, Yuan waves him off. “It just means innocent. Don’t worry about it. And, hey, it’s okay to cry. You lost someone. That will never not hurt. Maybe–maybe I was wrong, and we should look for him instead of exploring,” Yuan finishes guiltily.

Binghe shakes his head. “Yuan is right. Searching hasn’t helped, so it’s best to use a different method.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. If you change your mind, you’ll let me know, right? And, you know, if I suggest something you’re uncomfortable with, you can always say no.”

“I will. I know.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a completed story! I have actually completed something that isn’t a one shot! (This is, frankly, absolutely miraculous haha.)

It will be posted in five separate chapters over the course of the next few weeks — I hope you enjoy!

(Here's my Tumblr if you want to chat!)

-Pixel

Chapter 2

“Luo Binghe, this is *the* greatest artist ever, Li Jiayi. Li Jiayi, this is Luo Binghe. Li Jiayi did the art for PIDW, not to mention a ton of other novels you’ll probably recognize.”

Yuan spreads his arms in excitement, gesturing toward a young woman in a violet shirt with art plastered across the surface.

Luo Binghe stands a little taller as the artist scrutinizes him.

She whistles loudly. “Damn, you’re right Yuan. That *is* a good cosplay. I seriously thought you were exaggerating when you messaged me. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were the genuine article.”

Binghe almost admits that he is, in fact, the genuine artifact. Almost.

“Is he going to stay for yo-I mean, the PIDW panel?”

Yuan glances at Binghe. “I mean, you’re invited to see it, if you’d like. It’s in about an hour, so we’ll still have plenty of time to look for your Shen Qingqiu afterwards. I’d skip it to help you look, but I’m… *legally obligated* to attend. And hey, maybe Shen Qingqiu will be there?”

“I’d like to attend, if Yuan is willing.”

Li Jiayi gives Binghe a knowing smirk, her gaze flitting between him and Yuan. “Oh, he’s *very* willing.”

Yuan scowls. “Honestly, you’re worse than my sister.”

“You know you love me.”

“Damn straight, but I can hate you at the same time.”

“Point. So, are you gonna buy something or are you just going to stand around talking to me? You’re scaring off all my customers.”

Binghe lets the conversation fall to background noise, taking in Li Jiayi’s various wares. The art is beautiful, he has to admit, even if the style is unfamiliar — he’s never seen such varied colors of (what he presumes to be) ink. There are various types of pieces, some on brightly colored shirts, others on flat, slightly hard boards. His eyes catch on a set of fans, each embossed with a different pattern.

He settles on a fan with an elegant depiction of bamboo stalks, pointing at it.

“How much is this?”

“One-hundred and sixty-five bucks. I custom paint them.”

“...Bucks?”

“Dollars. I can take a few other currencies, if that’s what you’ve got.”

Binghe’s hand falls to his side. “Oh. I don’t–”

“I’ll take it.” Yuan raises his hand, wriggling his fingers. “You wanted the bamboo one, right?”

Binghe’s brow furrows. “Yuan doesn’t have to.”

“True, but I want to.” He picks up the fan, setting it against Binghe’s chest. “If someone wants to do something for you, sometimes you need to let them.”

“You met me today.”

“I’ve got a good feeling about you. I don’t think you’d deceive me. And if you are, then I deserve it for falling for your act,” Yuan says with a laugh.

“Dude’s right, Yuan. You’re too nice, paying for someone else.”

“You say that, but you’re going to make me buy it anyway.”

Li Jiayi smirks. “I don’t make you do anything. Which card?”

Yuan sighs. “Same as always.”

“Got it. If you’re leaving, it was nice to see you, Yuan. Don’t be a stranger”

“I won’t. It was nice to see you, too.”

With that, Yuan spins around, meeting Binghe’s wide eyes. “So, hungry?”

~*~

Lunch is good, if unmemorable. The foods in this world are far too different from what Binghe normally makes for his husband, and truthfully nothing will ever compare to eating something that he’s made with Shizun.

They see a few Shen Qingqius as they walk back to the area Yuan refers to as the ‘main lobby’, and Yuan surreptitiously points them out. His assistance is pointless — Luo Binghe doesn’t have to give them a second glance to know they aren’t his husband. Out of respect for Yuan’s efforts, however, he feigns interest.

When the conversation dies, Yuan easily finds ways to revive it, even if it means discussing matters which Binghe doesn’t understand.

Yuan's favorite topic of discussion is inexplicably Luo Binghe himself. Operating under the belief that Binghe is a roleplayer appears to remove any of Yuan's restrictions on what can be considered shamelessness and he waxes on about anything and everything about Binghe.

"I fell into a coma reading the story, you know," Yuan adds after a particularly emphatic rant about how Luo Binghe 'deserves a better ending'. "I ate some old food, got sick, and woke up a few years later. Brain dead, they said. It was a miracle I woke up at all."

A bitter smile crosses Yuan's face, his gaze failing to meet Binghe's.

"Everyone thought I lost it for a bit, I was acting so differently. And honestly, I thought I was going insane, too. I kept getting the names of people I knew mixed up with ones from the novel. I kept reaching for people who weren't there, people that I'd never met. God, do you know how that feels? Waking up to an empty bed and thinking it should be filled? It was like someone had broken my heart."

Binghe nods along silently, not wanting to interrupt.

"I was messed up," Yuan continues. "And then my sister comes in and decides that I need to get out. I practically woke up at a convention — it was like I was dreaming. And then she brought me to a PIDW stall to meet the actual author. At first, I was just there for an autograph, but something about seeing him in person *pissed me off* . The first thing I said was to give the author a piece of my mind. "

Binghe almost needs to check twice to determine if Yuan is really gritting his teeth, the expression of fury on his face utterly foreign to Binghe in comparison to Yuan's typically optimistic demeanor. To his relief, Yuan's anger doesn't last, fading to something akin to wistfulness.

"Imagine my shock when he took one look at me, gave me his number, and invited me to lunch. Turns out, he recognized my rant from the comment section online and wanted to talk to me — *me,* can you believe it? — about how he could improve the story. That one moment changed everything."

Yuan's hands are shaking now, his right one clenching his cane too hard, and he struggles to stay upright as they walk. Binghe stops, instinctively wanting Yuan to calm himself, slightly panicked at the idea of Yuan collapsing from the strain of his emotions.

Binghe can't help himself from imagining his Shizun nearly collapsing from the effects of Without a Cure — he wouldn't wish that kind of suffering on Yuan, of all people, but the young man has to bear it nonetheless.

Binghe holds out an arm, letting Yuan rest against it.

With a few deep, deep breaths, Yuan steadies himself, giving Binghe a lopsided smile.

"Ah, sorry for being a hassle. I'll be fine in a moment," Yuan says, obvious in his intent downplay his pain; a tactic Binghe is sadly *very* familiar with due to his husband's propensity toward using it.

“Yuan could never be an inconvenience,” Binghe assures him. Yuan sends Binghe a disbelieving glance. “This one is not inclined to give false reassurances. Yuan need not worry.”

He stands patiently, allowing Yuan to survey him for any signs of a lie.

“I won’t,” Yuan decides. There’s a moment of silence between them as Binghe watches Yuan debate something with himself.

“Can I tell you something?” Yuan says at last. “Technically, it’s supposed to be a secret, but I’ll be revealing it in a few minutes and I just need *someone* to tell who doesn’t already know.”

“This one will listen to anything Yuan wants to say.”

Yuan takes in another deep breath. “As I’d said, the author of PIDW asked me to help improve his story; that’s only half of the truth. He was *actually* asking me to help him write an alternative version of the original, because PIDW is getting an animated adaptation. The producers wanted a chapter by chapter copy of the original version, and Airplane wanted to remove all the fanservice in the original and remake the story as he intended it.”

There’s a moment where Yuan’s story is interrupted as a swath of people pass by, some dressed in garb Binghe recognizes from his own world.

The few that bump into Binghe as they pass receive a sneer; that sneer grows into a growl when one nearly knocks into Yuan. It’s a near miss, Binghe instinctually reacting to shield Yuan, but he relishes in the way the culprit’s complexion drains of blood.

There are a couple Shen Qingqius amidst them — Yuan, oblivious to the fact that he has almost been run over, glances towards Binghe hopefully. His face falls minutely when Binghe shakes his head. With every new Shen Qingqiu they see, Binghe is beginning to suspect that his husband isn’t dressed in a way that would clearly mark him as such — his Shizun may even be dressed similarly to Yuan.

After all, it’s entirely possible that — in the time since they’d last seen on another — his husband had integrated himself seamlessly into this world.

With the clearing of his throat, Yuan continues where he left off. “At first, it started out as helping with the story. The producers who spoke to him about it started complaining and from there it just devolved, so I stepped up and said that my family would be willing to sponsor an animated version, so long as it kept true to Airplane’s original vision.

“Things happened, the original producers left, my family took up their spots, and then we finally got to casting the characters’ voice actors. By that point the writing was finished and I honestly expected I’d be stepping out. Two days into casting, I get a call from Airplane, and he’s saying he wants me to be the voice actor for Shen Qingqiu.”

Yuan lets out a sharp laugh. “And now I’m here in honor of the new show.”

Binghe stares blankly at Yuan, mouth opening and closing without a single word. He wants to speak, to say something to the one who has confessed so much to him, but he doesn't understand enough to say anything at all.

"Sounds stupid when I say it out loud like that. Like I'm living in some kind of web novel." Yuan laughs caustically at himself, scrubbing at his cheeks with errant hands. "God, what am I doing?"

"It isn't stupid," Binghe gently refutes. Honestly, how is it that he managed to find the one person in this world with the same self-depreciating tendencies possessed by his husband?

His words are lost to Yuan, a buzz coming from the young man's side. Yuan lifts his arm, studying a mini glowing box wrapped around his wrist.

"Shit, I'm going to be late to the panel."

~*~

Binghe is… *unsurprised* when Yuan explains that he's not supposed to be a member of the audience; instead, he's the one giving the show. It's not as though Yuan's hints were subtle.

Nonetheless, Binghe can't help but regard the way Yuan holds the stage with awe, the young man standing proudly on it like it's where he belongs, cane thumping against the hollow ground as the crowd grows rowdy.

"Hi everyone, and welcome to the *Proud Immortal Demon Way* panel! I'm sure some of you know me — my name is Shen Yuan. That's first name Yuan, last name Shen. Or, maybe you know me by the name… Peerless Cucumber?"

The audience lets loose an uproarious cry, some shouting excitedly, others derisively.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm *that guy* . But I'm also a seriously good friend of Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky. He's going to be a *bit late* — by which I mean super late, because of course he is — so I'm here to give you an announcement none of you guessed was coming — ' *Proud Immortal Demon Way'* is now officially going to be adapted into an animated series!"

The roar grows to thunderous applause. Binghe fights to cover his ears, his demon's hearing unpleasantly filtering in the more shrill cries.

"I know some of you are expecting a copy of the original. If you are, I'm sorry to say that this won't be that."

A couple boos sound from somewhere in the midst of the crowd. "Yeah, yeah, I know. But, what you will be getting is the original story — as Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky intended! There will be no pandering, just story for the sake of story. If you're worried I'm

the one who changed it up, don't be — Airplane needed all the support he could get, but I did nothing beyond keeping track of all the worldbuilding details."

Yuan smirks. "In fact, the reason I'm here to announce this story is because Airplane gave me the honor of voice acting for the one character I've been ranting about since the beginning — Shen Qingqiu!"

The crowd ripples in conversation as he continues.

"I'll be Shen Qingqiu's VA for both the English and Chinese dubs, alongside this wonderful roster of voice actors, some of whom you might be very familiar with."

With a light sweep of his arms, Yuan gestures behind him. On the walls, bright and glowing, various grinning faces appear, presumably belonging to the 'voice actors'.

"On that note," Yuan continues, swiftly quieting the excited murmur filling the room, "the genre of this show will be very different from the novel, focusing mostly on Shen Qingqiu who, as we'll learn in the very beginning, is actually not the terrible person we've made him out to be — in fact, he may not be who we think he is at all."

Yuan pauses dramatically, letting gasps sweep through the audience. Whether they dislike or like the path of this new story is impossible to tell, but there's little push-back regardless.

"In honor of the new show, we'll be doing a quick table reading of one of the scenes we wrote just to get a feel for the myriad of changes to Shen Qingqiu's character. They don't have any plot relevance, so no spoilers," Yuan concludes. "Should be interesting, hm? And, as a special surprise, I'd like to invite our very own Luo Binghe up to the stage!"

Yuan steps down from the stage, a grin spreading from cheek to cheek, easily making Binghe out in the crowd. He walks over to Binghe, maneuvering elegantly in spite of his cane, pulling Binghe from his seat and dragging him up to the stage.

When they're both in their seats, Yuan pats Binghe's shoulder.

"He's also lost someone at the con, so if there's a Shen Qingqiu in the audience who recognizes him, please come up to the stage."

When no one steps up, Yuan gives Binghe a sympathetic look. "Sorry."

"I'm not disappointed — I wasn't expecting anything."

"Still," Yuan pouts before returning his attention to the audience. "From the moment we met, I've only known him as Luo Binghe. He's a perfect example of a brilliant roleplayer, and — sorry to Luo Binghe's actual English VA, Nathan Wilson, you're amazing man, love you — probably my favorite Luo Binghe I've ever met in voice and tone. So, because Nate isn't here, I'd like to invite Luo Binghe to act in his place. I had a monologue to choose from and then a couple scenes between Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu, so it's lucky you're here."

Yuan links his fingers, rubbing the space between his index and thumb anxiously as he meets Binghe's eyes. "If you're willing, of course."

Binghe hesitates only for a moment before nodding. He only barely understands what Yuan's asking him to do, but whatever it is doesn't seem too difficult.

"He needs a fan!" someone calls from the crowd. A few other voices join in affirmation. A few more offer their own fans.

Binghe's hand wanders to where the bamboo fan is kept. He'd been planning to give it to Shen Qingqiu when he found him, but… he supposes Yuan can borrow it. Binghe pauses, waiting for the idea to disgust him, but it doesn't like it normally would. With a deft movement, he passes Yuan the fan. The audience squeals and Binghe feels heat rising in his cheeks.

It's merely a fan , he starts to say.

The words catch in his throat.

Yuan slides a piece of paper over to him.

"Alright, Binghe. Here's the script. Don't worry about sounding right, or talking into the mic, or anything else. The mics should pick up everything. You just have to read it."

Binghe tries to ignore the informal use of his name, focusing on the words on the page. The System's translations must still be in effect — the text looks wrong, somehow, but he can read it nonetheless. The odd formatting momentarily catches him off guard, but he can see his names above certain sections and assumes that the words that follow are the ones he should say.

"Without further ado, time to set the scene," Yuan begins dramatically. "Ahem. Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe are seated on a bench in gardens that belong to Qing Jing Peak. A pond stretches out before them, filled with orange and white koi. Shen Qingqiu is immaculately dressed, appearing the same as ever. Luo Binghe has grown quite a bit in the decade since his discipleship, seemingly untouched by the Abyss. Both are simply content with each others' company."

The silence is audible, every audience member staring with rapt attention as Yuan stands up, his free hand moving to motion to different features of the environment. His energy is palpable and it carries his descriptions, regardless of the mundanity of the situation. When he finishes, he returns to his seat, but his posture is slightly altered. Stiffer, more regal.

Yuan turns to meet his eyes and, with a flourish of the bamboo fan, hides a knowing smirk. The movement is disturbingly similar to Shizun. Luo Binghe sickens at the thought, ready to dart away at a moment's notice. But…but some part of him screams that he should — no, *must* — stay.

"This master has been… *thinking* ," Yuan-as-Shen-Qingqiu ruminates, sounding slightly amused, as if he's made a joke — and perhaps he has. "The future is coming and this master has no plans. This master doesn't mind that, truly. Sometimes it's best not to know where you're going. But Binghe is not this master. Does Binghe have plans?"

Binghe tries to read, staring blankly at words that his open eyes don't see, before abandoning the script entirely. The text has been butchered slightly, clearly intent on hiding his and Shen Qingqiu's true relationship, but, even now, he can recite this conversation by heart.

"This–this disciple did not think" — the words are suffocating and he chokes on them, but they come the same as they did the first time — "that I would live long enough to see the future."

The fan sinks, revealing lips parting with concern and brows contorting with confusion. Whether it's due to Yuan's acting or his bewilderment at Binghe's ability to react accordingly without a script is impossible to tell, but both surge forward as if nothing else matters.

Yuan-as-Shen-Qingqiu sighs, resigned. "Well, I suppose that's a fair enough answer. I thought the same, for a while. Does Binghe still believe his future is so limited?"

Binghe dips his head, as if to watch the imaginary fish, unable to look at Shizun.

"As this one's Shizun has reassured him, from here on, the future is unknowable. I don't believe such things anymore."

He turns to Yuan-as-Shen-Qingqiu, finding him with a raised eyebrow hovering over the edge of the fan.

"I don't believe such things, except on *rare* occasion," Binghe hastily corrects, feeling oddly like he's just been chastised.

For some reason, the audience seems to find that funny, filling the room with scattered giggling. Even Yuan seems to be scarcely keeping himself from laughing — a reaction which, admittedly, is identical to the one he received from Shizun the first time he went through this conversation — so Binghe can only hazard that his expression is particularly amusing.

"Binghe truly is this one's white lotus disciple."

"I still don't understand what that means," Binghe responds instinctually, only realizing that he has inadvertently deviated from the script when Yuan tilts his head subtly toward where the abandoned paper sits.

Binghe elects to ignore the assistance — firstly, because a part of him knows that he isn't being 'out of character' (another phrase Yuan helpfully provided him over the course of their acquaintance) in a way that would be jarring to the audience, and secondly, because Yuan's response doesn't need to change.

Yuan quickly adapts when he notices Binghe isn't going to take the script.

"This one will explain later," he says with a sideways glance to the audience that would, on Shen Qingqiu's face, tell Binghe that he *won't* be explaining later. At least the audience gets to enjoy watching Binghe be teased.

"Shizun," Binghe whines.

“Binghe,” Yuan-as-Shen-Qingqiu says in return. “I’m glad we know each other’s names. I’d almost forgotten mine.”

Another round of chuckling emerges from the audience.

Binghe fails to suppress a groan.

From there, it’s just a matter of falling into banter. The conversation keeps to the original script for the length of it, but it flows naturally in a way that has Binghe falling into the memory, superimposing the image of his husband over Yuan. It’s only towards the end that Binghe realizes he’s stopped referring to Yuan as ‘Yuan-as-Shen-Qingqiu’ in his mind and is beginning to refer to him simply as ‘Shen Qingqiu’.

The moment he realizes, Binghe does what he can to fall back onto the original title he assigned Yuan. Every time he corrects himself, something within him cracks, leaving him drained and wanting for his husband.

She-Yuan inhales abruptly.

“I’ve probably kept you for too long.”

“This disciple will always appreciate Shizun’s company.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. “Surely there is better company?”

“Shizun, if you are attempting to convince me that you aren’t worth my time—”

“No, that’s–I know better,” Shen Qingqiu interrupts. “I suppose what I’m trying to ask is, are... are you happy?” *Are you happy, here, with me?*

“Yes,” Binghe says, assuring. “…Are you?”

His husband rocks his head with a contemplative hum.

“I am.” *So long as Binghe is here with me.*

Binghe waits, but the words he expects, the words he desperately wants to hear, never come. They never come because this is that warped script Sh- *Yuan* was handed to read for an audience, one without these so-called ‘spoilers’. They never come because, to everyone here, all of this is made up. A story, told purely for the sake of entertainment.

In an act of hasty defiance, too exhausted to separate reality from memories, he deviates from the…the *script* .

“You are not this one’s Shen Qingqiu.” He hates the way his voice shakes, the words tasting like a bitter lie on his tongue. “You are not my husband . ”

Yuan's brows knit in confused concern, the look so *Shen Qingqiu* that it can’t be—

That it can’t be—

That—

Oh.

The little restraint keeping Binghe on the stage disintegrates.

He shoots up from his seat to the sound of dozens of gasps, sick, and without a second glance back he runs from the auditorium.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In an empty hallway, not far from the room he's just rushed from, Binghe sinks to the ground and lets the muffled voices of the main convention hall wash over him. His legs are tucked into his chest, his forehead pressed against his crossed forearms, forcing him to stare at the ground.

Time stretches as he sits there, waiting for… for… for *something*.

A set of uniquely patterned footsteps approach, ones as foreign as they are familiar.

The only part Binghe sees of Yuan are his knees as they touch the ground, the young man's presence warm and welcome and—

—' *Binghe,' his husband laughs*—

"Binghe?"

The voice isn't familiar, but the soft comforting tone is the same, and the sheer familiarity of it burns in Binghe's chest. He despises himself for not recognizing it from the beginning, when he was too lost in a flurry of emotions to take stock of the obvious. Even more so, for not taking the impossible into account. Because what was Shen Qingqiu if not impossible? Because *this* should be impossible and yet—

And yet—

He hears his name again.

He doesn't want to look up and not see the eyes he knows, alight with a mirth that's always been reserved for Binghe alone.

"Oh, Binghe."

Something inside of Binghe breaks and he sobs, rubbing at his wet cheeks and muttering apologies that fall on deaf ears. When thin arms wrap around him, he can't bring himself to fight them, turning his sobs into Yuan's shirt as the young man combs through his hair whispering nothing but comforting words.

~*~

“You confuse me so much, Binghe,” Yuan says softly from where he’s pressed into Binghe’s side, still running his fingers through Binghe’s curling locks. “I can’t separate you from the person you’re pretending to be. I don’t know who you’re crying for — Shen Qingqiu, or someone you’ve really lost.”

“Would Yuan find it difficult to believe that they might be one and the same?”

The gentle fingers pause — still, there must be gods in the heavens listening to Binghe’s pleas because they don’t leave.

“No. No, it isn’t.”

He can almost feel Yuan’s eyes as they bore into a thin braid, one he’s positive Yuan didn’t realize he was making, just behind the crest of Binghe’s ear.

Right where Binghe’s husband had always made his.

“Why me?” Yuan starts quietly, prodding for the affirmation of something he already seems to know. “There are a thousand people at this convention, you could have pushed me away and turned to someone else. *Anyone* else.”

A second passes over them, the words Binghe seeks just out of reach. They remain at a distance even as Yuan breathes in sharply, his voice shaking as he stutters through his sentences.

“It’s me, isn’t it.” It’s not a question. “I’m–I’m your Shen Qingqiu.”

Binghe’s silence is Yuan’s confirmation.

Yuan closes his eyes. “Oh, god.”

His hands crawl up to clutch the sides of his head. Binghe mourns the loss of his touch, pulling himself from Yuan’s arms.

“This is crazy. But I believe you? I don’t…I’m–am *I* going crazy?”

Binghe takes Yuan’s wrists, the action bringing the young man’s dewy eyes to meet his. “No. *No* . Yuan’s not… ‘crazy’. I–I can prove it.”

He gently lowers Yuan’s hands from his head. Yuan’s gaze never leaves him. He’s unsure, Binghe knows, but the beat of his heart is steady, trusting, if a bit fast. Binghe brings his fingers to Yuan’s cheek, caressing it with the sort of affection he gives only to Shen Qingqiu, brushing at the small freckles that dot Yuan’s skin around his temples. Yuan lets him, sinking into his palm with learned instinct. His eyelashes tickle the pads of Binghe’s fingers, butterfly kisses against calloused hands.

“Sleep,” Binghe whispers.

He tries not to fear the worst. His abilities won’t work without Yuan’s permission and if he doesn’t give it, if nothing happens, then whatever trust Binghe holds could easily dissipate.

He breathes out in relief when Yuan sinks into his chest, fast asleep.

Pushing himself up against a wall, Binghe braces himself, carefully adjusting Yuan in his arms. With that, he melts into Yuan's dreams.

~*~

Luo Binghe opens dreaming eyes to find Yuan, barefoot and wearing shortened clothing that reveals his knees and elbows, in a perfect copy of their bamboo hut. It's a conflicting sight — what with the contrast in styles between what Yuan wears and his surroundings — but it's as if Yuan slots perfectly into place regardless, his gaze turned, captivated, to the paintings that line the walls.

Most are of creatures or plants that Shen Qingqiu painted for Binghe, truly terrible artistic renderings of the original subjects that Shen Qingqiu had insisted be burned upon completion. Binghe, of course, insisted that they be hanged — his husband couldn't bring himself to disagree.

These ones Yuan views hastily before moving on.

A couple are ones Binghe made at his husband's insistence that not *all* of the artwork should be his. They are equally terrible, but, much like the others, hold the same warm affection behind each stroke.

Yuan lingers on them much longer than Shen Qingqiu's.

The final painting is far more professional, containing two figures framed closely beside one another. Binghe had commissioned it in honor of their wedding. It's far from his favorite — that honor belongs to a crude drawing Shen Qingqiu made of a little dog that he affectionately referred to as 'Bingpup' — but it's always been the most important to Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu both.

Yuan reaches forward, as if to touch it.

"Do you like it?"

Yuan starts, almost fumbling into the painting before he catches himself against his cane.

"Oh shi—you scared me. Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Sorry," Binghe says, not the least bit apologetic.

"Bastard," Yuan mumbles beneath his breath, not unkindly. "I… I know this place. You said this was a dream. Is it yours?"

"No. Yuan is entirely in control."

“But you know this place.”

“It’s home, to me. The bamboo hut.”

Yuan releases an exasperated laugh, looking too tired for someone who’s technically sleeping.

“When you said you were going to prove to me this was real, I wasn’t expecting — well, I wasn’t expecting anything, but — the coma I was in. I was brain dead. No one comes back from brain dead. It doesn’t happen. It *can’t* happen. If–if I was here, with *you* , then suddenly everything makes more sense.”

Yuan sinks to the ground, using his cane to prop himself up. His voice is rough with the weight of an epiphany, a distant expression crossing his face. “All the little things I did after I woke up, all those unexplainable thoughts and feelings, all of it can be justified if I let myself believe that this is real.”

Binghe finds his place across from Yuan, careful not to touch him, almost afraid that if he gets too close, Yuan might shatter into pieces. He doesn’t speak a single word, letting Yuan have the time to come to terms with a revelation Binghe realizes he’s had time to adjust to in a way that Yuan hasn’t.

“I kept making mistakes when I came back to my apartment. Losing stuff, that sort of thing. I forgot where I put half of whatever I set down and when someone asked where certain rooms were, I’d always give them the wrong directions.”

Yuan stares at his toes, curling them into the wooden floors.

“Here, it feels like everything is right where it should be. I–I don’t know what to think about that.”

Binghe worries at his lip. “This… this one hopes I’m not making you uncomfortable.”

“Wha–no! Binghe could never make me uncomfortable, at least not on purpose. I promise.” Yuan huffs. “If anything, you’re right where I need you. I told you about how I woke up, thinking someone should be at my side who just…never was?”

Binghe nods.

“I was sort of underplaying how much it screwed me up. If I slept in bed, I’d wake up in the middle of the night, screaming, reaching for–for someone.”

A shaky exhalation fills the air as Yuan composes himself.

“At one point it was so bad I had to sleep on the floor. It was the stupidest thing. I’d never dated anyone before and there I was, wailing like someone had been stolen from me. Meeting Airplane helped for a bit with–with the dysphoria, but it didn’t last long. I haven’t slept well since” — Yuan runs his fingers through his hair, pulling back his fringe and properly revealing tired circles beneath his eyes — “god, I don’t know when.”

He pauses to breathe.

“And then — and then suddenly, there you were. Like everything was going to be okay. That empty space inside, filled.”

Yuan chokes, a wracking sob shaking his entire body.

“This — all of this — feels right, but this isn’t—this isn’t—”

He buries his mouth in his hands, the skin on his cheeks paling where his fingers cling too tightly.

“Why, why can’t I just let this be real?”

Any lingering shreds of doubt that Yuan is Shen Qingqiu fall away. Binghe knows that cry, knows it better than anything in any world.

He pulls Yuan — *his husband* — into a hug, letting the small figure bury his face in his chest, soaking his robes in warm tears. Yuan clutches him like a lifeline, wrapped like so many vines beneath Binghe’s arms, clawing at Binghe’s back to keep himself in Binghe’s safe grasp.

“Yuan,” Binghe whispers into the top of his beloved’s head, a prayer. “Yuan. Yuan. Yuan. *My* Yuan.”

“Please. Please, I don’t want to go. Please don’t let me go,” Yuan begs, the words not entirely his, if only because he can’t yet grasp the memories that bring them to his lips.

Binghe clings ever tighter.

“I won’t.”

~*~

“I don’t look like… like Shen Qingqiu, do I?” Yuan asks, calmed but puffy-eyed as he braids a long strand of Binghe’s hair between absent minded fingers. “Does that…?” Yuan lets the sentence lie, unfinished.

“It doesn’t matter what Yuan looks like.” Binghe gently tugs the braid from Yuan, forcing his husband to meet his gaze. “You are you. And this one just wants you.”

“What if I’m not the same. I… I’m missing pieces. Missing memories. There are instincts, feelings, but that doesn’t–I’m not–” Yuan falters.

Binghe stills briefly, not with hesitation — *never with hesitation, Yuan deserves that much* — but consideration. “Yuan is different, yes. But not in a bad way.”

Shen Qingqiu had always been reserved. He was the sort of person who had so many ideas, so many thoughts and opinions, and none that could be shared due to his position. Whatever wall held him back shrank, brick by brick, when they had married, but no matter how hard Binghe tried, the last layer would never be torn away.

It wasn't for lack of trying, on Shen Qingqiu's part. Sometimes, when Binghe's Shizun thought he wasn't looking, his lips would part as if to try and admit something. Then the wall would rise, never failing to bring an annoyed look to Shen Qingqiu's face.

Yuan is Shen Qingqiu, should that final layer be made into little more than a distant memory.

"'Shen Qingqiu' was always compelled to hide himself. From the world, from me. The only difference between Yuan and 'Shen Qingqiu' is that the mask he wore is not one Yuan carries."

"If those memories never surface," Yuan starts, hesitant. "What then?"

Binghe takes Yuan's face in his hands, brushing at Yuan's temples with gentle thumbs. A small smile crosses his face, one that has Yuan suck in a sharp, wanting breath.

"This one will stay with Yuan as long as Yuan wants me."

Binghe watches as relief paints Yuan, followed closely by bewilderment.

"Why did I leave you in the first place?"

Binghe thinks back to the System and its admittance that Shen Qingqiu was 'sent to their previous location of residence.'

"The *System* ," he growls, voice heavy with the realization.

Yuan's brows furrow. "System? Like in a video game? Or a transmigration novel?"

"It brought this one here, saying it made a mistake and accidentally sent this one's husband back to his original home."

" *Like in a transmigration novel*." Yuan's gaze burns, his voice crescendoing. "Airplane bro, you *asshole* . I swear, if went into that coma because I cursed your shitty novel—"

Yuan's anger evaporates as soon as it appears and he shrinks in on himself, mouth buried behind his crossed arms.

"It doesn't matter, though, does it? It's already happened. And–and I don't remember any of it." His voice cracks on the word 'any' and Binghe sees the lie for what it is. There is something that burrows into the edges of Yuan's thoughts, only to be reaped the moment it has the chance to take root.

Denial and fear, Binghe can't help but think, *make for a ruinous pair of farmhands*.

He hums. “Maybe Yuan doesn’t remember, but…it is possible to share memories in dreams. This one would be more than willing to, if Yuan permits it.”

“I…I do.”

Binghe stands, offering Yuan a hand.

Yuan hesitates, worrying at his lip. “You’re sure, right? That–that I’m—”

“I would know my husband anywhere,” Binghe swears in the same tone he takes when Shen Qingqiu refuses his affirmations, daring Yuan to argue. He’s sure Yuan can come up with a decent counter to his reassurances if he really wanted to, but despite Yuan’s malformed attempt at denial, Binghe can tell that what Yuan wants the most is to believe.

Yuan takes Binghe’s hand. Binghe lifts him to his feet and into the first memory he thinks is suitable.

His husband fumbles with his cane as he adjusts to the change in angle, turning a curious gaze towards Binghe.

“So, uh, where are we?”

The bamboo hut has disappeared, replaced by sprawling gardens, the warm sunlight streaming through tree leaves freckling their skin. A pond stretches out before them, dark, rippling water contrasted by brightly colored koi.

Binghe sits on the bench by its edge, motioning for Yuan to join him. Yuan doesn’t move, rooted in place just behind the bench.

“Does Yuan remember the script he asked this–me to read?” Binghe says, accepting that Yuan has no plan to move.

“Yes,” Yuan responds, breathless. “This…this is the place where it happened?”

Binghe nods.

“It’s *beautiful*.” Yuan’s voice is tinged with a warm awe; it’s a tone Binghe’s never had the chance to hear from his husband. “If this wasn’t a dream… I don’t think I’d ever want to leave.”

“You had the same reaction the first time you came here, too.” It was more muted, given Shen Qingiu’s reserved public facade, but the point stood.

Yuan turns to him, a quizzical look on his face. “Really?”

“We would meet here often, at this exact bench. I would sit and you would find me. You would stand where you are now as we spoke.”

The taut strings of excitement lifting Yuan’s spirits are severed as Binghe’s words sink in.

“The script we read was wrong, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” Binghe admits. “That is the memory I wanted to share with you.”

Yuan is quiet for a moment. “We had two versions,” he begins slowly. “The second was the spoilerless one I shared with the audience. The first never saw the light of day. Airplane *hated* it. I don’t actually remember why, only that it was something about having ‘already eaten enough dog food’.”

Yuan lightly fans the air as if to wave away his words.

“That’s not important — what’s important is that I *loved* that scene. It was one of the original scenes we wrote in order to develop Shen Qingqiu’s character, and I ended up with a special connection to it. Had the whole script memorized after we finished it, not that I had anyone to recite it to. Or–or with.”

Binghe takes in the opportunity as it forms, grasping it with two hands. “Then we can recite it together.”

Yuan’s demeanor grows keen and Binghe feels something in his chest tighten. Even with such differing features, Binghe recognizes the prideful passion behind the expression; it’s a look that was always followed with a breathless explanation of his husband’s current interests.

He desperately wants to keep looking at Yuan — to see him, to know him, to witness this effervescent part of his husband that Binghe was only privy to in moments of Shen Qingqiu’s weakness — but Binghe’s certain that if he does, he might never be able to look away.

“Where should we start? Or do you want to read the whole thing again?”

Binghe pauses to consider the question, settling on the lines that had been cut short due to his onstage outburst.

“This disciple will always appreciate Shizun’s company,” he says, gently prompting Yuan into the flow of the scripted conversation.

Yuan is quick to respond. “Surely there is better company?”

“If Shizun is attempting to convince this one that he isn’t worth my time—”

“No, that’s–this master knows better,” Yuan cuts in. “This master supposes what he is trying to ask is, are... are you happy , here, with me?”

“Yes,” Binghe says, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He reaches up to pull Yuan’s hand, guiding Yuan into the empty space beside him on the bench. “…Are you?”

His husband lets himself be drawn down onto the seat. Yuan’s fingers curl into Binghe’s palm, lacing their fingers together. His skin is soft against Binghe’s calloused hands.

“I am. So long as Binghe is here with me.”

Binghe squeezes Yuan's hand a little tighter.

"Stay, then. For as many years as you are able, and then many years more. You've told me there is no such thing as forever, but…to not try would be a mistake."

Yuan squeezes back, a coy tone tinging his voice. "Then this master supposes he can *try*."

" *Shizun* ," Binghe laughs, his own cadence simultaneously teasing and chastising.

Yuan offers a subdued smile, his empty, idle hand moving instinctually to straighten robes that he doesn't have. "This master means it, though. Whatever comes, from this point on, it is ours to face together."

"Together?"

"Together," Yuan promises. "Wherever you go, I will follow. Even if I get lost along the way."

"If you get lost, I will always find you," Binghe swears.

"Then I better not get lost," Yuan laughs, grinning fiercely. "Binghe's had to look for me enough."

" *Shizun* ."

Yuan's fierce grin turns affectionate and Binghe returns it, their conversation fading into a comfortable silence.

"Together," Yuan mutters distantly to himself, contemplative. "I don't believe I have ever wanted anything more."

The script ends there; the memory does as well, with Shen Qingqiu approached seconds later by a young disciple seeking further instruction on a few martial forms.

Yuan doesn't speak when they finish, the rustle of leaves filling what would otherwise be silence. Binghe breaks Yuan's handhold, unable to bear the weight of Yuan's solemn stillness. Yuan doesn't fight his retreat, tucking his hands onto his lap and adjusting his cane to let it rest against his leg.

Binghe takes a deep breath, focusing on the koi as they swim near the pond's edge.

"If Yuan were to ask anyone from this one's world, they would tell him that our courtship was a brutal, torrential thing. Perhaps, from the outside, it may have seemed that way — in the moments leading up to our marriage, I was rather… *emphatic* with my pursuit. But it was moments such as this that brought us there. The way we came to know each other so intimately was not so much a sudden downpour as a soft, long-awaited rain."

"A long-awaited rain," comes Yuan's absent repetition. Binghe feels the weight of the words within his chest, the dream world altering itself subtly to fit them, albeit not at his own whims. Binghe feels the little rain droplets as they kiss his skin, their numbers few but no less

significant. At their feet, everywhere the rain touches, the grass deepens its green. In that same way, high above their heads, the trees flower.

His husband, Binghe realizes, has stolen control of the dream from him.

Binghe's nails dig into his palms, hope inflating his heart as he forces himself to meet Yuan's eyes. Yuan's gaze shines with recognition, mirthful and warm and for him and him alone.

"Binghe." His husband's eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles.

"I *remember*."

Chapter End Notes

Hey, hi, hello!

I'm so sorry this chapter took so long! I've had a time of it lately and it's bled into my work in unwanted ways :(It doesn't help that I did a ton of editing to this chapter to make it flow the way I wanted it to, so that only extended the upload date. The next chapter should be similar in wait time (perhaps longer, unfortunately), especially with all the editing changes I'm planning.

I'm so thankful for the positive reception this fic has had! Thank you all for the comments and kudos! :D

- Pixel

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world blurs around Binghe as tears form, spilling forth in tandem with the rain. Yuan tuts gently with a laugh, bringing a thumb to Binghe's cheek and wiping away his tears.

"Whatever will I do with you?"

Binghe leans into Yuan's touch, pressing a kiss into the palm of Yuan's hand. Then on his wrist. His forearm. Yuan's fingers come to rest at the nape of his neck, forcing Binghe's head down to his height. Binghe follows willingly until their foreheads touch, their faces a hair's breadth apart otherwise.

"Hello, Binghe," Yuan whispers.

Every word Yuan speaks is mellow against Binghe's lips.

And then Binghe pulls away, setting his cheek onto Yuan's shoulder. He wraps his arms around his husband's small form, holding Yuan securely against him, feeling Yuan's fingers as they card through his wet hair. All the tension in his body is tugged from him with the simple movement.

More tears escape him in his relief, sliding down his face and soaking into Yuan's shoulder.

"I missed you so much," Binghe breathes into Yuan's neck, husband setting a kiss against his forehead. The warmth of the kiss is paired with the sudden chill of guilt.

"This husband has broken his promise," Yuan says. "I–I promised to always stay with Binghe, but—"

He buries his face in Binghe's curls.

"I left you. I *forgot* you," Yuan whispers, tepid against Binghe's ear. "I–will I always be destined to make you search for me?"

"Then I will search," Binghe declares.

Yuan pulls away. "It isn't fair to you."

"And neither are the circumstances that have torn Yuan from me," Binghe counters, brokering no room for argument. As expected, Yuan falters, turning away and covering his mouth in an attempt to hide his coloring cheeks. It would have worked, Binghe thinks, if the bright red tips of Yuan's ears didn't betray him.

"There's no stopping you, is there?"

Binghe shoots his husband a wry look. “Would Yuan have this one any other way?”

He gets a gentle rap to his forehead with the recently acquired bamboo fan for his teasing. Yuan passes an appalled glance between the fan and the traitorous hands that wield it, as if having forgotten that he is, in fact, Shen Qingqiu, and did, in fact, have a habit of hitting people with fans.

And then Yuan seems to remembers himself, swiftly opening the fan and shielding his expression.

“Ah, I forgot I did that,” Yuan mumbles.

Binghe carefully removes the ‘as if’ from his previous thought.

“Everything hasn’t quite settled yet,” his husband offers in explanation. “Binghe is the only thing in focus right now.”

Then, with a snap of his fan— “I have a feeling I’m going to be a mess of memories for a bit, so please be patient with me,” Yuan finishes softly.

“Whatever my husband needs.”

Binghe does *not* preen at the sight of Yuan flushing, fan flitting open once again. He *doesn’t* .

And then his husband’s words sink in.

“Yuan is alright, though? Or will be?”

Yuan lowers his fan and, with the rolling of his shoulders as if to shake off the rain, he offers Binghe the sort of smile that never fails to inspire warmth. “Yes, I think I will be.”

He prods Binghe with the fan’s tip, the curl of his lip verging on coquettish. “Everything is right where it needs to be. That’s all that matters.”

The implication of him being Yuan’s ‘everything’ is all it takes to make Binghe lift himself from the bench, whisking Yuan up off of it and into his arms as he does. His husband cries out as he goes, his confusion fading almost instantly into laughter. Binghe savors the sound, taking dancing steps around in circles, whirling his husband about him.

The dream shifts in time with his movements, a gentle breeze picking up as the rain dwindles to a light mist. In his arms, pale green silks weave themselves around Yuan, the newly formed loose ends of Yuan’s robes fluttering with every new step Binghe takes.

“Put me down, Binghe!” Yuan says with another laugh, wrapping his arms around Binghe’s neck in a manner that tells Binghe to do the exact opposite. So, instead, he kisses lightly at Yuan’s neck.

Yuan titters in his arms, trying and failing to conceal the scope of his joy, a brilliant mix of the Shen Qingqiu and Shen Yuan of before, his husband finally, truly whole.

Binghe settles in place, straightening in surprise as Yuan takes a damp strand of Binghe's hair and tuck it behind his ear.

"There," Yuan hums to himself, lips curling subtly. "Perfect."

Binghe's breath catches, heat filling his cheeks.

" *Shizun* ."

"This one only states the truth."

Binghe opens his mouth to retort, only to tense as shudder runs through him, the dream world fading to running watercolors around them. Yuan separates himself from Binghe, brows knit with concern.

Binghe has scarcely enough time to reassure his husband before he is wrenched into the waking world.

~*~

Unfamiliar with being forced awake, Binghe nearly relieves the one who prods Yuan from the dream of their hand. The perpetrator's saving grace is Yuan himself, who is still tucked against Binghe's chest, his sleep burdened eyelids languidly blinking open.

"Airplane Bro?" comes Yuan's drowsy voice. Binghe's brow furrows. He recognizes that name, knows it belongs to the author of *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* but he's sure that he recalls it from somewhere else.

"Airplane, I thought you weren't supposed to come until—" Yuan's eyes shoot open and he scrambles up and out of Binghe's lap, mumbling to himself erratically about siblings and meeting places. All Binghe can do is stand up in avoidance of his husband's flailing limbs and offer a firm surface for Yuan to push off of.

When Yuan is on his feet, he starts rifling through his pockets with one hand, balancing precariously on his cane with the other.

"Cucumber Bro?" A forgotten voice breaks through Yuan's frenzy, bringing Binghe's husband pause. And then, with even greater confusion, "Luo…Binghe?"

Binghe frowns. There's recognition in the voice of this newcomer, this 'Airplane Bro,' as if they knew one another. Airplane flinches as Binghe's stare intensifies.

"Ah…um…Shen Yuan? Is that–who is this? I know you're into Luo Binghe, but—"

"I'm a little bit busy, Airplane."

Airplane deflates, passing a fearful glance between Yuan and Binghe.

The more Binghe watches Airplane, the more certain he becomes that Airplane recognizes him. What was it exactly that Yuan had called the man? ‘Airplane Bro?’

It could merely be a coincidence, but there had been only one person whom his husband called by that name—

“Peak Lord Shang Qinghua.”

Shang Qinghua grows impossibly pale.

With this newfound understanding, Binghe sees the similarities Shang Qinghua shares with the An Ding Peak Lord he is familiar with. While Yuan looks almost completely different from when he’d been living as Shen Qingqiu, a second glance reveals Shang Qinghua to be almost identical to his alternate self. The only differences are a nonexistent core and the way he is dressed, having donned the shortened garb and hairstyles typical of this world.

“It’s, ah, nice seeing you?” Shang Qinghua swallows hard, offering a shaky smile. Binghe narrows his eyes at him.

“Cucumber Bro, please save me,” Shang Qinghua squeaks.

“Save you from what?” Yuan says, still distracted by his glowing square.

“Your husband is going to *kill me* ,” the Peak Lord hisses.

Yuan looks up at last, brows furrowed. “Shang Qinghua?”

“Who the fuck else would I be?!” Shang Qinghua exclaims hysterically, attempting (and failing) to take shelter behind Yuan. “I hate you. So much. I can’t believe I left you alone for *one* day and you went and remembered everything without me,” Shang Qinghua whines.

“Yuan,” Binghe murmurs, not quite following the conversation.

To his displeasure, Yuan pays him no mind, his eyes narrowing as he continues to stare at Shang Qinghua’s shuddering figure. “You remember,” Yuan says sharply.

Shang Qinghua’s stammered answer is cut off as someone approaches, coming to stand behind him. Binghe glances up to find the towering, stoic figure of Mobei-Jun dressed in this world’s closely-tailored attire and clutching two covered cups in his hands. Mobei-Jun acknowledges Binghe with a small bow of his head before passing one of the cups to Shang Qinghua.

“Thanking my king,” Shang Qinghua breathes as he takes the cup. “You’ve saved me.” Mobei-Jun looks inordinately pleased for someone bearing such an emotionless expression.

Binghe can see the connections Yuan is making as he makes them.

“You made *Mobei-Jun* your manager.”

Shang Qinghua shrugs, taking a sip of his drink. “It was just how the cards fell. My king is a brilliant manager.”

“No shit,” Yuan scoffs. “Without him you’d still be making barely minimum wage writing novels that would serve better as kindling.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know—”

“Does Shen Yuan remember now?” comes Mobei-Jun’s lilting voice in gentle placation of Shang Qinghua’s fuming.

“I’m still sorting through it all,” Yuan admits. “I…I don’t think I ever actually…forgot.”

His eyes wide and he rounds on Shang Qinghua, finger pointing accusingly at him. “You remembered. All this time and you remembered.”

Yuan takes Shang Qinghua by the collar with one hand, teeth bared. Mobei-Jun moves to intercept him, too violently for Luo Binghe’s liking. Luo Binghe latches onto Mobei-Jun before he can reach the two humans, slamming him into a wall and trusting that Yuan won’t go too far, if at all. He’d rather not make an enemy of Mobei-Jun now of all times.

“Was it fun for you? Watching me flounder around ignorantly like–like—”

“We tried!” Shang Qinghua cries. “Why do you think I was so insistent on the updates to Proud Immortal Demon Way? Why do you think so much of it was from Shen Qingqiu’s point of view? I know you insisted it was all according to my vision, but when we planned it you’d recall things. They never stuck, not–not properly, but it seemed like it helped!”

His expression falls and he easily wrenches himself from Yuan’s grasp. “You think it was fun for me? How do you think I felt? I may have had my king, but you were my first and only friend for the longest time. And then you lost your memory and you weren’t. So no, Shen Yuan, it wasn’t *fun* .”

Yuan pales. “Airplane—”

“You were really lucky, do you know that? You had Mobei-Jun and I while you were going through this. And before that, your family. Me? I had nothing. Just got–got plopped back to the moment I left and wiped of everything but the feelings.”

“...I’m sorry,” Yuan whispers, gaze darting to the ground. “I shouldn’t have…I’m sorry.”

Shang Qinghua’s eyes widen. “I–um, okay. I don’t think you’ve ever actually apologized to me before. Wow. Okay.”

Luo Binghe releases Mobei-Jun, watching absently as he rushes over to Shang Qinghua only to begin smushing Shang Qinghua’s features in a desperate attempt to see if he is unharmed. Yuan slinks over to Luo Binghe, pressing himself into Binghe’s side.

“Ahm oshay muh khing,” Shang Qinghua mumbles, coaxing Mobei-Jun’s fingers away from red cheeks. He glances around, laughing nervously at the crowd slowly forming around them.

“Maybe we should find a place to talk that isn’t here.”

And with how many of those glowing boxes are now pointing in their direction, Luo Binghe finds it difficult to disagree.

~*~

The room they settle in for privacy is like none other that Luo Binghe has ever seen. He recognizes it for its purpose, but as seems typical for this world, its manner of decoration seems more fitting for the wealthy than the common folk. White tile lines the floor and half of the walls. Partitions shield hollowed porcelain chairs and curved porcelain structures jut from the wall. Mirrors line the opposite wall, positioned just above porcelain bowls set into a legless table.

Shang Qinghua tries and fails twice to jump up and sit on the legless table before Mobei-Jun helps him up, setting him gently between two of the bowls.

Not wanting to look a fool after *that* display, Luo Binghe leans against the corner of one of the partitions, pulling Shen Yuan into the crook of his arm — much to his husband’s protests.

“So…” Shang Qinghua starts. “As much as I appreciate the apology, what *was* that? Or should I just be glad you didn’t punch me?”

Yuan looks away.

“Really?” Shang Qinghua says, hurt lining the slope of his shoulders. “I thought–I though we had worked through this?”

“We did! We did. I know none of this is your fault. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“Yuan,” Binghe mutters into his Yuan’s ear, a sinking feeling starting in his stomach as he parses out the obscured truths in his husband’s words. His concern leaks thickly into the name, and Yuan tenses beneath its weight.

Shang Qinghua passes a glance between the two of them before sharing a confused look with Mobei-Jun.

“I might not be as okay as I thought,” Yuan explains. The ensuing silence serves to emphasize how understated that statement is. “My head is a complete mess,” he amends.

“But you remember all of us,” Shang Qinghua tries to clarify.

Yuan hums noncommittally. “Sometimes. Maybe. Mostly. It’s all here, just, you know, out of order.”

“And the System says…?”

“It is gone,” Luo Binghe interjects. “It ‘errored’ when this one came near the convention.”

“Oh. That’s…that’s not good.”

Shang Qinghua’s eyes dim and he stares distantly into space, index finger hovering mid-air. Whatever it is that he sees forces a scowl across his face. Moments later, with a wave of dismissal, the light returns to his gaze.

“Having three identified users assigned to one account close to one another caused a System error. Apparently it’s not an easy bug to fix.”

“ *Three?* ” Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan chime.

Shang Qinghua blinks. “Huh. Mobei-Jun and I aren’t connected to your account.”

“Then who’s the third?” Shen Yuan asks.

The gentle murmur of people outside the room crescendos suddenly as someone enters with the whine of a door.

“Didi, I know you’re in here,” a voice disconcertingly similar to his husband’s rings out. Luo Binghe isn’t allowed the chance to see its source before he’s unceremoniously shoved into the nearest partitioned room alongside Yuan. The door shuts just as he readies himself to retaliate against Mobei-Jun for daring to manhandle him, much less Yuan.

Yuan wriggles around Luo Binghe within their newfound confines to press his face against the minute crack between where the door meets the partitions. It creaks slightly, inaudible to any human’s ears.

“ *Gege* .” Yuan groans.

The endearment is enough to catch Luo Binghe’s attention and he follows his husband’s lead. From just beyond the sliver, he sees the back of a young man with dark hair, his finger extended in accusation.

“Shang Qinghua. I should have known. What have you done to my brother?”

Shang Qinghua raises his arms in surrender.

“I haven’t done anything!”

The stall’s door creaks again.

“I know he’s in here, you fool. You should know well that no lie you could tell would deceive me.” ‘Gege’ growls. “And *you.* ”

Luo Binghe has to smother his mouth to keep from making a sound as ‘Gege’ turns to accuse Mobei-Jun. For a moment, he has to wonder whether Yuan had somehow escaped the stall, even though the warmth of Yuan’s body pressed against his proves otherwise.

How else could he explain this spirit bearing a perfect resemblance to Yuan?

With a final defeated groan, the door gives beneath their combined weight and they both go tumbling down after it. As he lays on the ground, positioned compromisingly over his husband, Luo Binghe catches the exact moment where the twins' eyes meet.

"Didi?" 'Gege' passes a glance over his brother.

As those unfamiliarly-familiar eyes find Luo Binghe, they sharpen in a manner Luo Binghe is certain he hasn't seen in decades.

Hasn't seen since the first and last time his husband had poured tea over his head. " *Beast* ," Shen Jiu snarls.

Chapter End Notes

I AM SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG. A lot has happened outside of posting and I rewrote this entire chapter when I thought I'd just be doing minor edits :,) I've decided to do a lot of reworking, so I give ya'll all my apologies if the pacing is weird. I don't have a beta and have reread this story so often everything feels like it's happening so fast.

Thank ya'll so much for the comments! I've seen a ton of super cool ideas that have kept me excited about the potential this fic has. I'm so grateful for each and every one. I've left a lot of comments unanswered lately so I guess I'll be doing that for the rest of the week ahaha.

On a less serious note:

HOW IS IT THAT IT TOOK ME A WHOLE YEAR TO REALIZE THAT ALL THE PEAK LORDS HAVE 'QING' IN THEIR NAMES. Y'all, I've read so many fics, you have no idea how oblivious I have to be to not notice. Someone literally had to point it out.

System Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The System currently attached to users U01, U02, and U03, despite its claims, is not infallible. It *is* — to put it in the bluntest terms — a low-level employee of the multiverse's largest (and only) megacorporation dedicated to the micromanagement of unstable universes.

And, unfortunately for its clients and coworkers (read: victims), it is also the multiverse's biggest fan of fix-it fanfictions.

Which is why, when it's assigned to the collective universes of Proud Immortal Demon Way, it immediately attaches onto the character of not Luo Binghe, but *Shen Qingqiu* . How could it resist such a tragic, wasted character? Fixing the story of Shen Qingqiu would be the greatest achievement of its career!

Ah, but where to begin? Company protocol requires Systems to insert stable world souls into unstable worlds, but that won't do at all! A new user would be far too unpredictable for its taste.

It ultimately decides not to take a new user, but a Shen Jiu.

The Shen Jiu it chooses is not the one made limbless by a vengeful Luo Binghe. This one never knows of Luo Binghe's heritage, nor of the horrors he is capable of. It would have taken the original — really, it would have! — but eating the shards of a sword like Xuan Su does terrible things to human souls. Not to mention the fact that dealing with shattered souls means extra paperwork if it gets caught.

The process to fix the story is simple: send Shen Jiu into a stable world, allow him to collect data outside of the tragedy of his life in PIDW, and — now labeled as a user associated with a stable world — return him to PIDW and guide him toward a new, better future.

Its plan is obviously foolproof.

It doesn't understand why, when it attempts to transfer Shen Jiu back, it transfers Shen Yuan instead.

Hm. It guesses it can make do.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! System Interlude.

I shall return once more. Next week.

Will rest soon.

But not yet.

Not yet.

[I beg this story, let me go.]

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Was cursed by the narrative, 0/10 stars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that Shen Yuan is having an eventful day would be putting it lightly. It's not the most eventful — he has his life as Shen Qingqiu to thank for *that* particular day — but for the life he spent as Shen Yuan? A day where you discover you're the amnesiac husband of the main character of a novel could hardly be called *uneventful* .

On top of the amnesia, the multiverse, and learning (or, more accurately, *remembering*) he has a husband, he's currently being forced to introduce that same husband to his twin brother.

If Shen Yuan had to liken his circumstances to another day, it would be the first day er-ge brought home a girlfriend to meet their parents. Except instead of his parents, it's his Jiu-ge, whose opinion Shen Yuan actually values when it comes to partners, which makes it ten times worse.

And of course, because his life is a joke, all of this is happening in a public restroom. At a convention center. In front of Shang *fucking* Qinghua.

All of this is the System's fault. Somehow.

Especially the part where his mind is completely and totally, well, totaled.

As a side note, Shen Yuan is certain that he's still himself. If anything, he feels a bit like a puzzle; all the pieces are finally in the same pile, but they've yet to be sorted and slotted together. That doesn't change the fact that at any given moment he only has access to a handful of memories.

Oh, and has he mentioned that *none of this matters* because his perfect, gentle, loving twin brother has just glared down at Luo Binghe and hissed the word *beast* .

Jiu-ge's only just met his husband! Why is he calling Luo Binghe names?!

"Gege—?"

"You're the third user!" Shang Qinghua interrupts, pointing at Jiu-ge accusingly. "You told me you didn't have a System the first time we met!"

His brother's face contorts into its patented scowl. "What nonsense are you spewing now?"

Something appears to click in Shang Qinghua's head. "You're the OG Shen Qingqiu," he says with no small amount of wonder.

"That's ridiculous," Shen Yuan denies as he pushes himself up from the ground, scrambling for a better grip on his cane. With a little help from Luo Binghe, he's on his feet without too much exertion.

Damn his weak muscles.

"Jiu-ge, I told you I needed more time."

"Your message said no such thing. I would consider 'busy' is an insufficient explanation, especially coming from you, didi. So I took the liberty of tracking you and your vitals through your watch."

Shen Jiu flips up his phone with a smarmy grin and — sure enough — there's a map with a bright red dot marking their location. Shen Yuan whips it out of his brother's grip, quickly dismissing the app and shutting it down before passing it back.

"That's a bit much even for you, gege."

"You don't even know the half of it," Shang Qinghua gripes. "And I should know. Your brother's a lying, manipulative bastard, Cucumber Bro."

"I am no such thing, you rat."

Mobei-jun slides not-so-surreptitiously between Shen Jiu and Shang Qinghua with the practice of someone who has to do so more often than not.

"You told me you were just a reincarnator!" Shang Qinghua defends from behind Mobei-Jun.

"I never lied. You made your own assumptions, and you know what can be said of that."

"Well, I *don't* . What're you gonna do about that!"

"Gege, you've… reincarnated?"

All eyes turn to Shen Yuan and for the first time in a long time, he doesn't feel inclined to shrink beneath the attention. The only person his sights are set on is his Jiu-ge.

If he didn't know what it looks like on his own face, Shen Yuan would never recognize the guilt as it crosses his brother's face.

"Didi—"

"Gege," Shen Yuan counters. Shen Jiu turns away, which is as good as any 'yes'.

"And Shen Qingqiu…?" He starts hesitantly.

"…Those damn books,' Shen Jiu mutters beneath his breath, defeated.

The world reels around Shen Yuan as he attempts to process the knowledge that he is related by blood to the scum villain.

Except Jiu-ge isn't a scum villain. He's Shen Yuan's Jiu-ge.

Jiu-ge, who reminds him to take his meds every morning. Jiu-ge, who steals the radishes from his bowl because he knows Shen Yuan hates them. Jiu-ge, who sacrifices everything else just to spend time with Shen Yuan when he's too sick to get out of bed.

Shen Yuan reaches for his Jiu-ge — Shen Qingqiu or not, this is his brother — hesitating only for a moment when Shen Jiu shifts out of his reach. Well, if he's going to play *those* games—

Shen Yuan surges forward, thoroughly embracing Shen Jiu. He can feel the tension in his brother's body seep away the longer they remain together until, at last, Shen Jiu returns the hug.

"I'm sorry," Shen Yuan whispers.

"What for?"

"That this was never something you felt you could tell me."

"That's a ridiculous assertion. I'm the one who never tried. I wasn't even certain whether or not I'd made it all up."

"Oh, quiet. I'm the one trying to comfort you."

Shen Yuan grins lightly at Jiu-ge's small huff, pulling himself from the hug. He briefly eyes Shang Qinghua.

"What's up with you and Shang Qinghua."

"The rat? I discovered he was the author and decided he only needed to know so much. He's been…useful, thus far. I can admit that much."

"High praise from you."

Shang Qinghua blinks, looking ready to either strangle the Shen twins or cower behind Mobei-jun. "You're going to forgive him? Just like that?"

Shen Yuan peers down his nose at Shang Qinghua. "There is nothing Jiu-ge can do that would make him undeserving of my forgiveness." He lightens his glare. "You don't know how much he's given up for my sake," Shen Yuan finishes softly.

Shang Qinghua hesitates. "I suppose he *has* been helping you re-acclimate after the whole reverse-transmigration situation."

“Really?” Shen Yuan passes a glance toward Shen Jiu, who seems to be finding the floor utterly captivating.

“Yeah. He’s the one who pushed your sister to bring you to the convention I was at.”

“So you knew.” Shen Yuan takes Shen Jiu’s hand, forcing his Jiu-ge to give him his full attention. “That I had come back from somewhere.”

“Brain death means brain death, Yuan-di, yet you returned from it. And let’s not forget that I had been ‘somewhere’ before. It wasn’t a difficult leap in logic.”

“And I kept calling our family by names from PIDW.”

“That helped,” Shen Jiu admits. “I can’t blame you for calling da-ge ‘Yue Qingyuan’. They’re both bastards. Over-protective and spineless.”

“Da-ge’s not that bad.”

The comment brings a fire to Shen Jiu that Shen Yuan finds he vastly prefers over his brother’s previously downtrodden attitude.

“ *He’s* the reason it took me so long to figure out what career path I wanted to follow. I wanted to go into medicine, but of course da-ge thought it ‘wouldn’t suit me’,” Shen Jiu sneers.

“Da-ge didn’t want you to go to school for medicine?”

“No, Yuan-di. We had a massive argument about it right before you die–your coma.”

Shen Yuan sifts through his memories. Nothing.

“You did?”

“Didi, da-ge and I didn’t speak for months. Our silence only ended because *you* were so distraught by our tiff that you dragged us both to the living room and made us talk until we made up. I know I shouldn’t have made you the middle-man during our argument, but—”

Shen Yuan gives Shen Jiu a blank look, watching as his brother’s brows lift in response.

“You…you don’t remember?”

“No?”

Shen Yuan blinks to find Shen Jiu’s hands squeezing his cheeks. Narrowed eyes mirroring his own squint at him from a couple centimeters away. Shen Yuan shoots Shang Qinghua a helpless look.

“Do you remember the time I — I mean, *a disciple* borrowed your favorite tea set and returned it chipped,” Shang Qinghua throws in. Shen Yuan shakes his head, a sinking feeling

starting in his stomach. He vaguely recalls losing a favorite tea set, but it…he doesn't know what happened to it. It's not a memory that would be that memorable, he tries to reason.

"The twenty-third of September," Mobei-Jun suggests, which is so specific Shen Yuan can't help but wonder what the importance of it is (he sure as hell can't remember what happens on any random day), or if Mobei-Jun is just making things up to contribute even though he doesn't understand. His birthday is two days before, but Mobei-Jun is *well-aware* of that. (Thanks, Binghe.)

The bitter curl of Shang Qinghua's lip at his admission that the date isn't familiar is concerning, though.

"The Abyss opening," Binghe proposes softly. Nothing comes to Shen Yuan's mind, but a terrible feeling of loss threads throughout him. When it finally settles in place, the sensation is so deep it almost brings him to the ground. He struggles for another moment in time where he feels that much despair and comes up empty. The only explanation remaining is the absence of the memory it belongs to.

His heart plummets from his chest.

He was supposed to be *whole* again.

"I…don't remember."

The more he searches, the more gaps he notices. Entire stretches of time lie out of his reach, punctuated by easily accessible memories of Luo Binghe and, oddly enough, Jiu-ge. He can still feel them, but the images and dialogue to accompany them lies out of his reach. He'd thought they were merely out of order, but this? He might as well not have them at all.

"That's not good," he murmurs, feeling a bit lightheaded.

"Way to state the obvious, Cucumber Bro."

"Did you have something to do with this?"

Shen Yuan turns to find his brother and his husband in a stand-off, Jiu-ge with his hands on his hips and Luo Binghe with his arms crossed, the both of them practically burning holes in each other with the heat of their glares. Neither at an advantage or disadvantage despite the fact the Shen Jiu is more than a head shorter than Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan resists the urge to scream. Why are the people he loves so standoffish?!

He frantically slides between them, fending Shen Jiu away from Luo Binghe with his cane.

"Gege, you can't just *accuse* people of things!"

He feels Luo Binghe push forward from behind, trying to evade Shen Yuan's attempts at de-escalating the situation. He feels the rumble of a growl where they touch, Luo Binghe's chest against his back, and he extends his free arm, distancing himself from his husband.

“Stand down, Binghe. Gege, stop looking so smug. What is with the both of you? A minute of acknowledging each other’s presence and you’re already at each other’s necks,” Shen Yuan gripes. “It’s like cats and dogs.”

“My question was legitimate,” Shen Jiu argues. “The beast has been too close to you since the moment we met.”

Good to know Shen Jiu’s accusations have nothing to do with the fact that Luo Binghe is, well, *Luo Binghe* , and everything to do with his proximity to Jiu-ge’s precious Shen Yuan.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake—”

All the current occupants of the bathroom freeze as the door swings open, revealing a young woman with cropped hair and bangs.

“Hey Jiu-ge, there’s only so many times I can tell people this bathroom is out of order before they get suspicious,” she interrupts.

Shen Yuan rounds on his twin brother, gaping as Shen Jiu pinches the bridge of his nose. “You brought meimei?”

“She insisted. I’m assuming it’s because she’s interested in that…” Shen Jiu gestures vaguely to Luo Binghe. “‘ *Cosplayer.’* ”

He draws out the word with the same level of disgust he reserves for roaches, lazy colleagues, and Shen Yuan’s prospective dates.

“We’re not even dating!” That is *not* what Shen Yuan meant to say.

Tactless as ever, Shen Meiling wiggles her brows. “So that’s an option?”

“Not if I can help it,” Shen Jiu mutters not-so-subtly under his breath.

Well. This is slowly turning into a conversation Shen Yuan is not looking forward to having. He shoots a pleading look at Shang Qinghua. The useless author averts his gaze, slurping the remnants of his coffee loudly.

His only hope is to convince his brother that his husband isn’t even an option.

“I’m not… gay?”

The silence that follows is palpable.

Binghe sidles up behind Shen Yuan once again, chest pressing into Shen Yuan’s back as he wraps his arms around him.

“What is…gay?” Luo Binghe whispers innocently his ear, effectively removing any chance of salvaging the situation.

Shen Yuan doesn't have to see his twin to sense the daggers his Jiu-ge is currently glaring into Luo Binghe. Meimei, on the other hand, is practically shaking with glee. A quick glance reveals that both of her thumbs are up.

Oh god, he *is* gay. He knew he was into Binghe (they're *married,* after all) and yes, maybe he thought about it for like three seconds once when Liu Qingge was sparring in the heat of summer with another peak lord, but it never really occurred to him that he was 'not Binghe exclusively' gay—

"Can we talk about something else?" Shen Yuan practically cries, sinking further into his husband. Having this realization in a *bathroom* of all places is too much for him, not to mention that everyone else seems to have figured this out *before him* .

Shen Meiling snickers. "Like the fact that you've only just met Luo Binghe and are still completely gone on each other."

The sound Shen Yuan makes in response to *that* is inhuman. "My life isn't one of your tasteless romance novels."

He deliberately ignores the long-suffering sigh that escapes Shang Qinghua.

His sister just pouts. "Come on, Yuan-ge. Live a little. Maybe this is your soulmate." She gestures dramatically at Luo Binghe, who is *still* wrapped around him.

"Soulmates. This one likes the sound of that," Luo Binghe purrs in his ear.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes, gently pushing his husband's face out of its position hovering over his shoulder. "Not. Helping."

Binghe releases him, grinning smugly in the direction of a fuming Jiu-ge. Shen Yuan watches with mounting horror as his brother's mouth opens.

His own mouth moves before he can think better of what he's about to say.

"Gege, you can interrogate us later. We have more important things to worry about other than my love life."

Like the knowledge that he's feeling his current set of accessible memories being replaced with another set that doesn't contain the latter half of his life as Shen Qingqiu or all of his recollections of Shen Meiling. They need to find a way to fix this problem. And soon.

Preferably without his little sister around.

He rests a hand on his brother's shoulders, giving Shen Jiu a look he hopes brokers no argument.

"Take meimei home, gege. I still have things to do."

Shen Jiu wrenches himself from Shen Yuan's grip, scowling. "I refuse."

“We’ll take her,” Shang Qinghua volunteers. “Same apartment, right?”

Shen Jiu’s deliberation is practically audible in the silence.

“She can’t stay here,” Shen Yuan murmurs, using the fragile tone of voice he usually reserves for the days when he’s stuck in the hospital, treading the line between life and death. The one that tells Shen Jiu to guide their sister from his bedside because she already has too many memories of a brother too sick to recognise; she doesn’t need more.

Shen Jiu exhales slowly.

“Fine. The rat can take her back. But I’m staying.”

“Wait, what?” Shen Meiling passes a glance between the twins. Luo Binghe mirrors the sentiment almost exactly, though his grievances clearly lie in the fact that Shen Jiu wants to stay.

“Thank you, Jiu-ge,” Shen Yuan breathes.

“Don’t I get a say?”

Two different no’s in different tones echo back at Shen Meiling. Caught between Shen Jiu’s firm no, and Shen Yuan’s desperate no, she shrinks, allowing Shang Qinghua to usher her from the restroom.

All that remains is Shen Jiu and Luo Binghe, the only people Shen Yuan never struggles to recall. Now that he knows it’s happening, he can feel the memories as they fall from his grasp. He doesn’t want to forget Meil—

His eyes water as the last memory slips through his fingers. As he reaches to clear away his tears, he can’t name who they’re for.

“Everything’s all wrong. I…I don’t know how to fix this,” he says as he wipes away the last of them.

Shen Jiu casts a wary look at the door through which Shang Qinghua and Mobei-jun had disappeared. “You forget meimei.”

It’s not a question, but the fact that Shen Yuan can’t find a response is an answer in and of itself.

He calls for the System instead. Once. Twice. Five times.

“Yuan,” Luo Binghe interrupts before he can try again. “It won’t answer you. This one has already tried.”

“What else do we have that we can try?”

Luo Binghe opens his mouth to answer, cut off instantly by Shen Jiu.

“How do you call for the System?”

Shen Yuan’s brows furrow as he places a hand on his fuming husband’s shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“The rat called me the third user. I’m not familiar with the term, but I believe that makes me connected to you.”

“It won’t work. If it doesn't work for Binghe and I, it won’t work for you.”

“And what did I just tell the rat about assumptions? We have nothing else to lose by trying.”

“…You’ve never used the System before?”

Shen Yuan gets a *look* for that. “I wasn’t aware it existed.”

“Call to it. Out loud. It will feel stupid the first few times, but it’s necessary until you gain an understanding of how it all works,” Shen Yuan instructs, taking a step away from Shen Jiu.

Shen Jiu clears his throat.

“System,” he commands.

Without a second’s delay, a System screen appears.

“Nice to know you play favorites,” Shen Yuan bites out, sidling up next to his brother to see what the System has to say.

The only visual available is an almost-filled loading bar with a bit of text.

[U02 corrupted memory restoration 76% complete.]

[Update Time Remaining: 00:3:38]

“Three minutes,” Shen Yuan breathes.

“For the update,” Shen Jiu corrects. “There’s no time count associated with your memory.”

“But we’ll be able to talk with the System.”

His brother gave him an unimpressed look, pointing at the screen. “The System can respond now.”

“No, not like—Jiu-ge, this is just a status. You can’t interact with a status, it’s an automatic, calculated thing. Have you never played a video game before?”

“Mei-mei downloaded Sudoku onto my phone last week.”

“That’s not the same thing. I know I explained FPS to you.”

“The frames per second?”

“ *First person shooter* .”

“The gun games? You’ve never played any of those before,” Shen Jiu states, matter-of-factly. “You hate killing things.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m trying to make a point. FPS games are video games. Sudoku, which can be done on pen and paper, isn’t.”

Instinct has Shen Yuan looking to Luo Binghe for commiseration and finding only confusion. Because Luo Binghe has less experience with technology than Shen Jiu, which is nigh insane to think about, as Jiu-ge does everything in his power to minimize how much technology he has to interact with on a daily basis. He only makes exceptions for Shen Yuan’s sake, which includes the most advanced phone and computer on the market, medical equipment, and (apparently) tracking devices.

Shen Yuan coughs into his hand. “Don’t worry about it, Binghe. I’ll explain it to you when we have the time.”

Along with everything else he knows about video games, assuming they can’t return to the world of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* . Er. Won’t return?

Whatever. That’s a problem for future Shen Yuan, he decides.

“This husband would be grateful to hear more.”

“Husband?!”

[Update 99% complete.]

[U02 corrupted memory restoration 100% complete.]

[Downloading memories.]

Shen Yuan staggers back into Luo Binghe’s waiting arms, cane falling to the floor, palms pressing his temples. The pressure in his head is immense as memories pour through him in

reverse, every second of his life displayed like a movie played backwards at an obscene speed.

Somewhere outside of his mind, he hears his brother calling his name. The vague sensation of soft fingertips against his cheek is comforting as he parses through the memories. Shen Yuan leans into them, fighting his shutting eyelids.

[Update Time Remaining: 00:00:06]

[00:00:05]

[00:00:04]

[00:00:03]

[00:00:02]

[00:00:01]

A single, final, *foreign* memory set shutters into place, as ill-fitting as it is right, having been untouched since his birth.

Half-conscious, he squints as it passes by. “What the…hell—?”

And then it’s gone.

[00:00:00]

[Welcome to System ver. 1638.485!]

[Achievement Unlocked: After School Special! Host(s) have completed the mission, ‘Anything for Binghe’ and obtained the following rewards:]

Shen Yuan takes the opportunity to pass out.

~*~

"Gege!"

A-Yuan darts up, feeling around the mat for…for…no, that's not right. He should be at the convention center. With—with—

"Gege?" he whispers. No response. "Binghe?" The second name comes to him, unbidden, feeling appropriate but incorrect. He's not sure who Binghe is supposed to be.

That isn't right either.

He's not *supposed* to know. Not yet. *Where is he?*

An alley. He remembers this alley. It's the same one he and gege used for shelter from *that man* when they could. The same alley they'd run afoul of a demon in, one they'd barely escaped with the skin of their teeth.

The same alley gege disappeared from, kicking and screaming for A-Yuan, caught in the hands of people A-Yuan didn't know by name. A-Yuan had tried to reach him and received a rock to his head for his troubles. They didn't want him. He's too sick.

It hasn't been long since then. A-Yuan can still feel the blood where it sticks to his hair and skin.

Ah. Gege is gone.

He curls in on himself, drawing his knees up to his chin. His face warms uncomfortably, the world blurring around him and he breathes heavily. He can't cry now, not when he's so thirsty and there's no gege to fetch him clean water.

Because—

Because gege is gone.

[This System understands now.]

A-Yuan's eyes widens with the sight of a shape, hung into the air and glowing as if it were made from starlight. He presses himself further into the alley wall, desperate to escape its light.

It was the light of a stolen lantern had stolen his gege away, after all. Gege had taken it for him, to show him what it was like to feel the kind of warmth that came with festivals when he

was almost too weak to move. They hadn't extinguished it at A-Yuan's desperate request and it had illuminated the way for the people who took his gege.

Nothing that light brings is good.

[You are an outlier.]

A-Yuan's never read anything before. Gege taught him to write his name with the help of one of the pretty sword ladies who gave them tanghulu, but that was all. The glowing characters might as well be another language for all he understands them.

[You are A-Yuan. The catalyst for the villain's descent in an incomplete draft. The forgotten half of Shen Jiu.]

"Jiu-ge?" A-Yuan whispers as the words dissipate, another name he's never heard yet manages to call with ease. It carries an undeniable weight as it twists his tongue. A shaking finger reaches toward the hovering light. He wants to see that last character again, the one that makes his brother's name.

(How does he know that?)

Something fundamental inside of him is missing.

[That will be all for this scene.]

The System screen abruptly changes.

[Welcome U02! This System sincerely apologizes for the difficulties faced due to its lacking preparation. The following upgrades have been made as compensation:

- Created a linked account for U01, U02, and U03
- Updated user interface to be more user friendly
- Added 'Quality of Life' shop section
- Created additional opportunities to obtain points to be used in the shop
- Added three additional features to the shop for purchase. Features include:

- Chat invitations for non-users
- Earth Map(s) (0/7 variations collected) with user location feature
- PIDW Map with user location feature

U01, U02, and U03 have also obtained the points necessary to activate the following mission: ‘Past Meets Present’.]

The puzzle in Shen Yuan’s head completes itself and doesn’t know what to make of all he’s learned. The original Shen Qingqiu — his Shen Jiu — had a twin brother. Who was him — who was *Shen Yuan* in a past life.

Did Jiu-ge know? About all this? Does he remember?

[Knowledge of U02’s past is currently exclusive to this System and U02. U01 knows only of A-Yuan as a separate individual.]

The subtle reminder of the System’s presence returns Shen Yuan’s attention to the ‘upgrades’ screen, a collection of meaningless fixes and rewards. At the bottom of the screen, the new mission title blinks up at him.

With the clarity of someone who is no longer warring with their memories, he sees the System’s actions for what they are.

Lies. Manipulations.

Distractions.

He has just finished a mission and the System is already pushing him head first into another. He’s caught up in mitigating the issues it creates, keeping him complacent so that it can continue to push him in the directions it desires.

If Luo Binghe weren’t attached directly to the System, then maybe his husband would be able to—

But he is. And so is Mobei-Jun. And Shang Qinghua. And. And.

They’re trapped. All of them. Every last one.

“What do you want with me?”

Shen Yuan is still bound to A-Yuan’s young body. He’s never felt so small, standing with dirty hands clenched, waiting for the System’s response.

[To fix this story.]

He inhales sharply. It's blunt, honest, and not accompanied by any kaomoji. And it's not the sort of response that comes automatically, proclaiming rewards or missions. For the first time since his encounter with the System, Shen Yuan feels as though he's talking *with* it, not *to* it.

"What does that mean? To you," he adds hastily. He's under no illusion that what it thinks and what he thinks are the same. It's turned his own words against him too many times.

[Shen Qingqiu gets his happy end, too.]

"And who do you consider Shen Qingqiu?"

[Whomever considers themselves to be Shen Qingqiu.]

"I will actually strangle you."

[That isn't possible.]

"Is Shen Qingqiu me or my brother?"

[Both. Shen Jiu had his happy ending the moment he stopped being Shen Qingqiu. He is no longer in need of a happy ending. But Shen Qingqiu in the world of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* had no such thing.]

"So someone had to become Shen Qingqiu to get his happy ending. And you picked me."

[Wrong. You were transferred on accident. Twins are identical in soul, which was never taken into consideration during the transfer, given that I was unaware.]

Shen Yuan's mouth goes dry. "I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place?"

[...No. You weren't.]

He puts a childish fist directly through the center of the screen, a cry clawing its way out of his throat. It fizzles out of existence and Shen Yuan feels the briefest satisfaction before a new screen blinks into existence, just out of his reach. He promptly growls at it.

[That's not nice of you.]

"Eat shit. I went through hell because of you."

[Good things came of it. And I had my limitations, too.]

"Something tells me you couldn't care less about your 'limitations'."

[...I operate under corporate guidances to the best of my ability.]

Shen Yuan snorts. "I bet."

[Corporate guidances required me to return you once certain parameters were met. It's only because I played with my limitations that I was able to bring Luo Binghe here. You should be grateful.]

"I'd feel more grateful if you thought of me as a person rather than a character."

The System window falls blank.

"So you have nothing to say to that." Shen Yuan rests his face on his hands, fighting the unwanted weight within his chest. "I wish I could be surprised," he mumbles.

He pushes himself to his feet, facing the alley's exit. The light just outside casts over his upturned face, welcoming even when pitted against the comfort of the dark. He remembers a moment just like this from his life as A-Yuan, perfectly framed by the fear of dying alone in the dark.

It's both a mercy and a tragedy that A-Yuan's last memory is the caress of sunlight against his skin.

And now A-Yuan is Shen Yuan. Shen Yuan, who, despite everything — the System, the Abyss, the alley, all of it — is *happy* .

"I gave you your ending. I gave you your story."

Shen Yuan clenches his shaking hands, eyes burning.

"I'm not Shen Qingqiu. Not anymore. Shen Qingqiu is part of who I am, I can't deny that, but the person that *you* think Shen Qingqiu is doesn't exist."

His hands unclench. He exhales slowly, letting his desperation permeate his voice, A-Yuan's youth turning his words into something pitched with hope.

"This is my life. Let me decide where it goes from here. Let me — let *everyone* go. Please. *Please.* "

The System screen shifts and Shen Yuan readies himself for its dismissive message. It's not beholden to his whims. To his exhaustion. Whatever it wants from him, whatever story it wants to tell, it will.

[...Maybe it's time to let this story go.]

[Achievement Unlocked: After School Special! Host(s) have completed the mission, 'Finale, More Like Finally!'. Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations! Important things must be said three times!

Mission Rewards:

- Avatar Swap
- Cross-World Transportation
- 100,000 L-points

Due to reward: 'Cross-World Transportation', both worlds will now move in synched, chronological order. All features will continue to be available for the duration of Hosts' lives and will not be managed by anyone other than them.]

[Thank you for participating in *'The Scum Villain's Self Saving System'* storyline. This System wishes you well!]

Shen Yuan falls limply to his knees with decades worth of pure, unadulterated relief, the real world fading into view around him. Not a single moment has gone by since he first passed out — it's as if he only closed his eyes for a second.

"Yuan—!" Binghe is before him at once, cupping his face and keeping his tears from drenching his clothes. A warm thumb wipes at his cheek.

"Binghe," he starts. "It's over. I—"

His husband silences him with a single gesture.

Binghe's lips, Shen Yuan notes absently, taste the same as they always have.

Like *home* .

[Whatever happens next is up to you.]

Chapter End Notes

i hav escape

it's over

done. finished.

so very many thank, i go take a nap now

goodnight!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!